

CONVERSATIONS

Make It Gorgeous and They Will Come: Lynden B. Miller

by Jane Roy Brown for COGdesign

Renowned public garden designer Lynden B. Miller has changed the face of New York City's public places with gardens at the Central Park Zoo, Bryant Park, the New York Botanical Garden, and Madison Square Park. She also created a garden at Wagner Park in Battery Park City, as well as smaller projects in all five boroughs and beyond. She has designed and enhanced campus landscapes at Columbia, Princeton, and Stony Brook universities, and is designing a garden for the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. Her motto: Make it gorgeous and they will come. Keep it that way and they will help.

Miller's forthcoming book, Parks, Plants, and People: Beautifying the Urban Landscape (W. Norton, fall 2009) tells how to promote and create public landscapes and gardens.

You have built your career as a designer of and advocate for public parks and gardens. Did you ever design private gardens or landscapes?



Lynden Miller in the Conservatory Garden.
Photo by Paul Serra.

No, except my own. My first public garden design project was restoring the Conservatory Garden in Central Park. I started that in 1982 when Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, who is my friend as well as the founder of the Central Park Conservancy [in 1980], asked me to take charge of saving it. The garden had become run down, and people in the neighborhood [East Harlem] considered it dangerous.

After that succeeded, people started asking me to design other places. Most of those were in other parks, but one wealthy lady asked me to design a garden at her home. By then, I had witnessed the transformative power of beautiful, well-maintained public spaces, and I knew that this is what I wanted to do. So I turned her down.

What were you doing before tackling the Conservatory Garden?

I was a painter of large abstract landscapes for eighteen years. I took courses in horticulture and garden design at the New York Botanical Garden, and for several years I lived in England, which is filled with gorgeous gardens. When I moved back to New York in 1979, I found that I had become a gardener who painted with plants. Once you make something beautiful, and it has a connection to nature, magical things happen.

Like what?

Today the Conservatory Garden is filled with people. It was deserted before we fixed it up. It has no graffiti, no crime, no trash, because it is well-planted and well-maintained. Sometimes I sit on a bench there and just watch and listen. Strangers will say to each other, “Look, there’s a hummingbird!” or “That’s the plant my grandmother had in her backyard.” They come back with their friends.

Why do you think this happens?

When you make something beautiful for people, they feel complimented and rise to the occasion. They get the unspoken message, “We did this for you, and you’re worth it. Now, help us keep it nice.” All people need a connection to nature to lift their spirits.

On 9/11, I saw the smoke from my window, and I found myself walking in a daze to the Conservatory Garden. Other people were streaming in. We were all seeking a connection to nature because it was something we could count on.



Lynden Miller in the Conservatory Garden. Photo by Ronda Brands.

On your website (www.publicgardendesign.org) you note that you have “taken an entirely new approach to public horticulture by creating rich plantings that provide four seasons of interest for New Yorkers.” Can you offer an example?

I concentrate on permanent plantings for all four seasons. Every place I design looks good in winter – there’s no excuse for anything bare. People need to see something beautiful all year round.

Aren’t such gardens high maintenance?

With a few exceptions – the large-scale landscapes and elaborate gardens which have gardeners – no. By using shrubs and very tough perennials, I try to make sure every garden is sustainable. My twenty-seven years of experience tell me which plants will grow in what conditions, and, before I take a commission, I demand a commitment from the client to ongoing maintenance and a contract for myself to train the gardeners and consult in the future. For the Conservatory Garden, I raised an endowment of \$1.5 million for continuing maintenance.

Is your new book a blueprint for others?

I spoke in Charleston, and the mayor, Joe Riley, came to my lecture. I had breakfast with him the next morning and he asked me, Where is your book? Why don't you have something you can leave with me so I can do what you said? That really galvanized me. So, yes. It lays out what I've done over the years and how to do that in other places – how to design and maintain public space, how to advocate for it, how to find volunteers and raise money.

You are well connected, charming, politically savvy. Some people might be skeptical that your projects are replicable without those assets.

A successful public garden doesn't have to be large. It could be a triangle near the gas station that could be planted to give people pleasure.

What was the biggest disappointment you've experienced in a public project, and what did you learn from it?

Years ago I designed a garden at the Central Park Zoo. The place was wonderful for a year or two, but eventually it all went away because no one understood the purpose of the design. I vowed I'd never design again without the ability to oversee maintenance after installing the project.

What cities enjoy the public support for public parks and gardens that you would like to see everywhere?

Chicago is the Holy Grail. Mayor Daley believes in the benefits of beautification and has transformed the city. My book also describes a number of other American cities and what they have done.

How do you maintain an ever-increasing roster of public gardens?

With difficulty! It's possible only because I work with great gardeners. A large garden for Hudson River Park may be my last big project. I'm going to try not to add any new ones. Unless they're too tempting for words.



About Jane Roy Brown



Jane is a writer, editor, and landscape historian. Her writing has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Garden Design*, *Landscape Architecture*, and other publications. She works part-time as the director of educational outreach for the Library of American Landscape History. Jane was recently awarded a Gold Award from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation. Jane lives in western Massachusetts with her husband, photographer Bill Regan.

Photo by Bill Regan.