

# In Winter Gardens, a Marriage of Botany and Stark Beauty

*For the solitary walker, frozen landscapes offer many delights.*

By PAULA DEITZ

UNLIKE the tragic hero of Franz Schubert's song cycle "Winter Journey" ("Tearless I must face the cold/Through the bitter weather"), multitudes of New Yorkers joyously headed for Central Park to experience in bright sunlight the season's first pristine snowfall on a preholiday Sunday. And in late-afternoon dusk, under the glow of lamplight, the glistening field of white seemed etched by circuitous paths marked in the distance by streams of brightly clad walkers and the shadowy silhouettes of fences. "Invigorating crisp, clean air" was the motto of the day.

For me the winter walk, with or without snow, offers visual pleasures akin to an appreciation of sculpture with the gnarly shapes of trees unadorned and with myriad bare branches like delicate abstract drawings. But more important, with the new year begun, January ushers in an introspective period best indulged on solitary walks without the usual distractions of colorful palettes and lush foliage.

Yet, there is much to see in the subtleties, especially in the variety of plants in local botanic gardens across the country. Since their earliest days in Europe, attached to universities, botanic gardens have thrived in urban centers; their beauty derives from scientific displays required for the orderly study and conservation of plants. But like local parks, they also play an important role as social and community environments.

For a brisk winter stroll I selected the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, which this year is celebrating the centennial of its founding in 1910. Within its compact 52 acres surrounded by city streets, the visitor experiences several individual spaces pioneered there, like the Japanese Hill-and-Pond Garden and the bonsai collection, begun in 1925. In a microcosm of the winter landscape the bonsai curator Julian S. Velasco has arranged several maples, one 115 years old, so that their leafless, outstretched miniature canopies blend through the glass wall with the haze of layered bare branches outside in the main garden. In contrast, a deep rose bonsai camellia echoes one in the Japanese garden by a rustic shelter. Here also, near the orange torii gate, an ever-blooming cherry tree of the palest pink was in blossom,



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a fragile mate to a bright green pine pruned into traditional cloud formations.

"In winter," said Scot Medbury, the garden's president, "one learns to recalibrate observations to detect the slow evolution of nature, the unfolding of witch hazel or the first snow drops. And in discovering the human scale of closed and open spaces here, one achieves an inner calm."

Still, standing in front of the massive outstretched boughs of the bare yellowwood tree provides a majestic moment, and the deep purple or white clusters of beauty berries from the verbena family are shockingly beautiful against the fresh snow. Elsewhere, one notices the mottled trunks of lace-bark pines, the gray velvet wraps around magnolia buds, the conifers' deep range of blues and greens and the stubborn scarlet oak

**WINTER BLOSSOMS** Above, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, a haven for strollers; at left, a wooden labyrinth by the sculptor Herb Parker at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden.

that refuses to lose its copper leaves. Yes, there are luxuriant tropical houses, but outside is the place for stark beauty.

Though botanic gardens exist to harbor native and exotic plants in pleasing habitats, the grounds also offer opportunities for landscape designs that can create an atmosphere of enchantment. With its 60 acres of lakes surrounding 9 islands connected by bridges, the Chicago Botanic Garden harks back to the famous 18th-century Garden of Perfect Brightness, the Qianlong emperor's pleasure-garden complex of lakes at the Old Summer Palace outside Beijing. In a frozen landscape, the high arched bridge to Chicago's Japanese stroll garden resembles the "Nihon Bridge Seen in the Snow," one of Hiroshige's enticing views.

Visitors either tramp along trails in 100 acres of woodland, snowshoe around the garden's perimeter or ice skate on the broad esplanade originally designed by Dan Kiley with pools and fountains. While the garden's prominent Midwest prairies are burned off in

spring and fall, remaining dried grasses persist as waving figurative elements against the snow like the yellowed weeping willows at the water's edge.

"Botanic gardens give a freedom of movement outdoors missing on wintry city streets," says the garden's president, Sophia Siskel, who is often seen out walking, hat pulled over her ears. "It's like swimming underwater thinking about myself inside myself in a way I don't do on a hot summer day."

Winter is something else in the mild climate of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in California, dedicated to preserving native flora of the region and maintaining a seed collection of local endangered species. The garden is one of the places associated with the prolific landscape gardener Beatrix Farrand. Last May, though, 60 of its 78 acres were destroyed, including thickly treed hillsides, when the rampaging Jesusita fire blew down Mission Canyon.

Fortunately the garden's meadow was preserved, and, nature being resilient, young green shoots are appearing around burnt stumps, and seasonal blooms of baja snapdragons, California poppies and frothy verbena are as plentiful as ever on a winter walk. The unexpected consequences of this disaster are the newly opened vistas of the Santa Ynez Mountains and views of the Pacific

## IF YOU GO

**Brooklyn Botanic Garden**, 900 Washington Avenue (off Eastern Parkway), (718) 623-7200, bbg.org. Tuesday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday, Sunday and holidays, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

**Chicago Botanic Garden**, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, IL, (847) 835-5440, chicagobotanic.org. Open every day, 8 a.m. to sunset.

**Santa Barbara Botanic Garden**, 1212 Mission Canyon Road, Santa Barbara, Calif., (805) 682-4726, SantaBarbaraBotanicGarden.org. Open every day, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., November through February; 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., March through October.

**Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden**, 10901 Old Cutler Road, Coral Gables, Fla., (305) 667-1651, fairchildgarden.org. Open every day, 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

"Stock-Pile," **Radcliffe Yard**, Cambridge, Mass., open all the time.

# In Winter, Botany Meets Beauty



ROBIN CARLSON/CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN

**MANY PATHWAYS** The Serpentine Bridge leads to Evening Island, one of nine at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

## From First Escapes Page

Ocean out to the Channel Islands. Seeing a garden in recovery mode with new prospects is surely an inspiration in the early days of a new year.

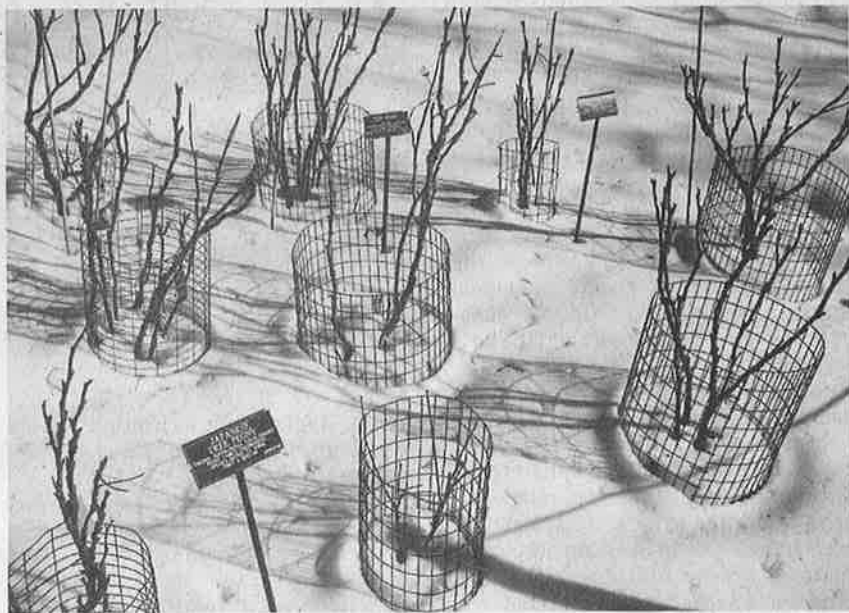
The Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables, Fla., suffered from nature's brutality when Hurricane Andrew struck in 1992 and uprooted its valuable collection of palms and ancient cycads. Designed as a stroll garden by William Lyman Phillips in the Olmsted tradition, and now totally regenerated, the Fairchild features paths that lead visitors through an allée of flowering trees into an infinity of exuberant tropical foliage and cascades of bougainvillea vines. With its active rain forest and lakeside mangrove glades the garden may appear to offer visitors a contrast to the spare wintry adventures in the North, and yet the sense of isolation amid so much botanical profusion may promote an equal amount of introspection.

Finally, in the Zen vein of contemplation, the landscape architect Chris Reed has designed a temporary installation not in a botanic garden but in Radcliffe

Yard in Cambridge, Mass., that creates a dialogue between natural materials and the passage of time and succeeds in provoking thoughts about the rapidity of change. Commissioned for the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study's 10th anniversary, the installation, "Stock-Pile," features a landscape of 10 cone-shaped piles of stone, aggregate, sand and soil on a diamond-shaped grid

with two piles of planted ferns in a parking lot.

Exposed to the elements these miniature mountains are allowed to degrade gently, unlike the famous pristine stone pile at the Silver Pavilion in Kyoto, Japan. Now blanketed in snow, these undulating Cambridge piles melting away are a reminder in the new year that time is both of the essence and fleeting.



RICHARD PERRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**SHADOW PLAY** The Japanese tree peonies are in hibernation at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, but their branches cast intricate shadows on the snow.

## ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Photos of the Brooklyn and Santa Barbara botanic gardens:

[nytimes.com/escapes](http://nytimes.com/escapes)