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A Force of Nature:
LYNDEN BREED MILLER '56



FOR THREE DECADES, PUBLIC-GARDEN DESIGNER LYNDEN BREED MILLER '56 HAS BEEN BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO URBAN SPACES, AND TRANSFORMING CITIES AT THE SAME TIME.

A FORCE *of* NATURE

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“March is the worst season for gardens,” says Lynden Breed Miller, and because she’s a renowned public-garden designer who over a 30-plus year career has created or rescued dozens of gardens throughout all five boroughs of her beloved New York City, you’re inclined to believe her. But a walk through the Central Park Conservatory Garden at Park Avenue and 105th Street on a gray and chilly mid-March afternoon might make you wonder whether her assessment is overly harsh.

True, the shrubs are looking a little thin and the ornamental grasses are faded and crackly. And true, the heavy snow of the past months has left behind its share of late-winter mud. But green is winning the battle with brown for color supremacy, snowdrops and a few irises are budding, the hellebores are in bloom, and some of the more than 40,000 bulbs planted here have started to poke up – all harbingers of the full palette of color the next couple of months will bring.

What’s far less up for debate is the transformation this garden itself has undergone. Three decades ago it was six overgrown, trash-strewn and largely forgotten

acres sitting next to an East Harlem neighborhood that most New Yorkers preferred to avoid. The difference between then and now? That would be Lynden Miller herself, a 5' 3" white-haired force of nature.

Painting With Plants

Lynden's passion for garden design began with an interest in art, and her interest in art began at St. Timothy's School. "I had this wonderful teacher," she recalls, "one of those teachers that changes your life."

That teacher was Jan Carlstrom, a young Smith College graduate whose art history course flipped Lynden's intellectual engagement switch to "on." Lynden went on to major in art history at Smith, and went from there to Washington, D.C., where she took a succession of jobs that she says rewarded her mostly for how fast she could type. The work was pleasant enough, but unsatisfying, so Lynden began studying art to see if she could become a painter.

It was around this time – the early 1960s – that Lynden met Leigh Miller, a fellow Democrat who held a position with the Kennedy Administration. They married, and in 1968 moved to New York City, where Leigh worked in international banking with American Express. Lynden opened an art studio; her signature paintings were large landscape collages.

She had always loved plants. When she was a child, an uncle she adored would take her into the woods in search of orchids, and he once let her help him build a garden at her grandmother's house. In New York, Lynden enrolled in horticulture courses at the New York Botanical Garden. When her husband's job took them to London for two years, she used the opportunity to visit every garden she could get to, often dragging along her two

young sons. The result was revelatory: "I began to realize that the English people designed gardens the way I was painting," she says. "They were painting with plants."

Lynden left New York for England as a painter who gardened. When she returned two years later she was a gardener who painted.

The Artist Gets a New Canvas

Central Park, the 800-plus-acre oasis in the middle of Manhattan, was the vision of legendary landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted, another New Yorker who had been inspired by the public gardens of England. In 1858 Olmsted and architect Calvin Vaux won a design competition to create the park, and after 15 years of construction marked by battles with park commissioners, Central Park opened.

By the start of the 20th century, however, the park had fallen into decline, full of "bare earth, decorated with scraggly patches of grass and weeds," according to historian Robert Caro. A revival began in the 1930s, thanks in large part to the efforts of Robert Moses, a powerful but polarizing urban planner. By the 1970s Central Park had slipped back into decline, falling victim to the city's economic and social struggles.

In 1979, Elizabeth Barlow Rogers became the first person to hold the title of Central Park Administrator, charged by Mayor Ed Koch with restoring Central Park. Lynden was friends with Betsy Rogers, and confided to her that she was becoming disillusioned with the world of professional art. Rogers had an idea. "She said, 'There's an overgrown six-acre garden in the northern end of Central Park,'" Lynden recalls, "'and I think you should restore it.'" That overgrown garden was the Conservatory Garden.

And with that, Lynden Miller's art got a new canvas. "My life changed irrevocably," she says. "I never went back to the studio. I loved painting with plants more than I loved just painting."

Like Olmsted when he won the Central Park design competition, Lynden had never actually carried out a public landscape design when she started work on the Conservatory Garden. And inexperience was hardly the only challenge she faced. In addition to designing the garden, she was responsible for raising money for its revitalization. Even some of those who contributed felt the project was doomed to failure. She says people would point in the direction of East Harlem, and using words loaded with racial and social-class commentary, would say, *they* will trash it. "People said you can't do anything nice there," Lynden says. "Everyone said I was insane. But I didn't listen to them."

Beautiful Bones

The Central Park Conservatory Garden takes its name from the majestic conservatory (greenhouse) that used to be there. Robert Moses had it torn down in the 1930s, after which responsibility for the redesign of the garden's plantings fell to a woman who was ideally named for this task: M. Betty Sprout.

Betty Sprout envisioned a formal garden, in contrast to the more natural style favored by Olmsted. Her basic design, which remains in place today, called for three sections, each with a different style: Italian in the center, French to the north and English in the south garden.

When Lynden entered the scene nearly a half-century later, years of neglect had failed to destroy what she calls the "beautiful bones" of the original design. The "bones" she refers to are the more permanent parts of the

landscape that Sprout created: the paths and hedges and trees, and especially the two rows of flowering crab-apple trees that flank the central lawn of the Italianate Center Garden and remain arguably the garden's single most defining feature.

In the fall of 1982, Lynden spread Betty Sprout's plans across her kitchen table to rethink the design. Replanting began that spring. Lynden had old, overgrown plants removed and gave those that still had value to community gardens in East Harlem. New shrubs, large perennials, and ornamental grasses went in first, followed by other plantings. She used tens of thousands of plants in hundreds of varieties, approaching the work much like she approached the collages she had painted. A massive display of tulips is a big spring attraction; another of chrysanthemums draws visitors in the fall.

"It's all designed to be a kaleidoscope of changing color, and shape, and form, and texture," Lynden says. "I designed it so that it would have something interesting in it all year 'round."

By 1983, Lynden's improvements were starting to take hold, and East Harlem residents began visiting the garden again. People from other parts of the city followed, venturing into an area that for years they had feared entering. In her book, *Parks, Plants, and People* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), Lynden tells the story of taking a cab from a meeting downtown to the garden late one afternoon while the restoration was underway. When she told the driver where she was going, he warned her she'd be killed if she went in the garden. She persuaded him to park the cab and come take a look at it with her. It was early May, and the cab driver's jaw dropped at the sight of thousands of daffodils and tulips and hyacinths in full bloom. "I've got to go home



Far left and right: The Conservatory Garden. Middle: A stunning example of contrasting form and color.



to Queens and get my wife,” the man said to Lynden. “She’ll never believe this.”

“People used to say they needed an armed escort above 79th Street, and this was 105th Street,” says Lynden, who has been director of the Conservatory Garden since her restoration project began. “It wasn’t actually dangerous. It just looked it. It was all overgrown, and it was practically deserted. I tried to make it as beautiful as possible. When things are beautiful, people respond to them.”

Transforming Public Spaces

Lynden’s success with the Conservatory Garden certainly got people responding to her. In 1986 she planted two 300-foot flower beds along the sides of the main lawn in Bryant Park, directly behind the New York Public Library, a section of midtown Manhattan that over the years had become more popular with drug dealers than book lovers. Then came a project with the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, followed by another for the Central Park Zoo.

Lynden has left green thumb prints all over the city. Other projects include the Pier 44 Waterfront Park in Red Hook, Brooklyn; Wagner Park in Battery Park City; Hudson River Park; the British Garden at Hanover Square; and Tribute Park in Rockaway, Queens, which is a memorial to the firefighters the community lost on 9/11. Columbia University hired her to beautify its campus. She has worked on garden design around New York housing projects. A project she calls her “favorite baby” is a tiny, long-neglected, 6,100-square-foot park between 96th and 97th Streets on Park Avenue. Descriptions of these and other gardens are on her website, publicgardendesign.com.

When Lynden takes on a new project, it becomes a major time commitment, with contracts lasting two years or more. That’s because if one part of the challenge is the design, and another is the planting, a third and extremely important part is ongoing maintenance, and Lynden wants to stay on board long enough to be sure a long-term stewardship program is in place. A well maintained park, she says, sends a message to citizens that their city cares about them; a neglected park does exactly the opposite.

Lynden had maintenance in mind when she wrote her book, which in part serves as a how-to guide for others seeking to create beautiful public spaces, covering everything from design and maintenance to fundraising and advocacy. “I was afraid that if I got run over by a bus, I wouldn’t have passed this on,” she says.

“She has done more to transform the public space in New York City than anyone else,” says her son, Gifford Miller, a former New York City councilman who now heads a company that works to increase the availability

of affordable housing in the city. “She has proved that an investment in public space can make an enormous difference. And she did this at a time people didn’t accept that. In the early ’80s, that was radical thinking.”

Reconnecting With St. Timothy’s

Though the public gardens of New York City remain Lynden’s first love and primary focus, her impact extends further. She helped turn 12 acres of concrete into gardens at Stony Brook University and has done work at Princeton. Showing few signs of slowing down in her mid-70s, she travels around the country to give lectures and teaches courses at New York University. She is chair emeritus of the advocacy organization New Yorkers for Parks.

Several years ago, St. Timothy’s Head of School Randy Stevens invited Lynden to campus to speak about her work, kicking into motion her re-acquaintance with a school she hadn’t been too involved with since she graduated. Each year Randy takes a busload of St. Timothy’s students to New York to meet with Lynden as part of a course the girls take. Lynden gives them a guided tour of the New York Botanical Garden and talks to them about parks and their importance in city life. “She’s so innovative, but really down to earth,” says Ali Sugarman, a St. Timothy’s junior who was on this year’s trip. “She took responsibility into her own hands to create these safe and relaxing places for New York.”

The course is called Theory of Knowledge, and Lynden is on the syllabus for two reasons: one, because of the way she blends aesthetics of art with the science of horticulture to touch the soul; two, because she’s a great role model for the students. “We want our graduates to go out and change the world,” Randy says. “Lynden is a great example of someone who has done that.”

A few years ago Lynden and design partner Ronda Brands did a master plan of plantings for the school, a complement to a comprehensive facilities master plan the school was undertaking. (Always looking ahead, Lynden is hoping that her fellow alumnae might support the campus landscape in the years to come.) Their plan outlined the selection and placement of plants for the Carter House courtyard; the Moongate Garden; Dixon Hall, the new academic building; and other spaces.

The first plantings went in the ground last fall. Lynden had hoped to be on campus to supervise, but Hurricane Sandy hit the day she was to arrive, forcing her to cancel. This spring everything will bloom for the first time, and when Lynden attends the dedication of Dixon Hall in late April, she looks forward not just to seeing the results, but possibly adjusting them. “I may try to move some things around,” she says. “A garden is always in progress. Someone once called gardening the slowest moving of the performing arts.”



Top: Lynden’s beautiful work on the moongate garden at St. Timothy’s School. Middle: The Conservatory Garden. Bottom, left to right: Columbia University; Wagner Park in Battery Park City.

The Daffodil Project

2001 was a mayoral election year in New York City, and in late summer, New Yorkers for Parks was arranging events to let people hear what the candidates had to say about the city's parks. The city was allocating about one-quarter of one percent of its budget toward operating funds for nearly 30,000 acres of parks, and New Yorkers for Parks was advocating for an increase in that allocation to a full one percent.

The mood was festive on a Sunday in early September as supporters gathered for a rally in Union Square Park. The candidates jockeying to succeed Rudy Giuliani as mayor all seemed to support an increase. Two days later, however, funding for parks was about the last thing on people's minds. It was September 11.

"I could see the smoke out my window," says Lynden, whose apartment at 98th Street and Fifth Avenue is eight miles from where terrorists had crashed planes into the World Trade Center towers. "I walked up to the Conservatory Garden because I wanted to be out in nature. It was filled with people who came up to me and said, 'Thank God this is still here. This gives us hope.'"

Restoring hope was on the minds of many in the days following the attacks. Among the concerned was a Dutch bulb supplier named Hans van Waardenberg. He contacted her, wanting to do something to help. Lynden replied, "You don't have any extra bulbs, do you?"

Van Waardenberg arranged for a million daffodil bulbs to be given to the city. He, Lynden and NY parks commissioner Adrian Benepe formed a partnership with the Dutch government. When New York Harbor reopened after the attacks, ships began arriving carrying thousands of boxes of the bulbs, which were distributed to parks all over the city. The Daffodil Project was underway.

Over the following weeks and months an army of thousands of volunteers set to work planting the bulbs in all five of New York's boroughs. The retail chain Target donated trowels and gardening gloves. Volunteers from other cities came to help, including one group that drove eight hours through an early-season snowstorm to plant bulbs in East Harlem's Thomas Jefferson Park. In November, the prime minister of Slovakia, in town to run in the New York Marathon, planted bulbs in Greenwich Village. In Brooklyn, on a site with a clear view of Ground Zero, volunteers cleared a vacant lot and planted 20,000 daffodils in the shape of the Twin Towers.

"Everyone wanted to do something to make the city feel better," Lynden says. "They were out there on their hands and knees in the soil. It made people feel good."

Then in the spring of 2002, people had another reason to feel good. The daffodils bloomed – a million of them, ringing the city in a vibrant yellow memorial to the 2,753 people who died in New York on 9/11.

The Daffodil Project didn't end there. Each year in New York more daffodils are planted – over five million since the project started, including bulbs around public housing projects and the Rikers Island Jail in Queens. Some 40,000 volunteers have been involved, making it one of the biggest community projects in New York City history. In 2007, Mayor Michael Bloomberg made the daffodil the city's official flower.

"We have a Daffodil Breakfast every year," says Lynden, whose goal is to plant one daffodil for every New Yorker, or just over eight million in all. "It's always been in Bryant Park, and we give awards to people who've worked with the project. My husband used to say it was the only place you could go to cry at breakfast."

Sanctuaries for the Soul

This past fall, New Yorkers struggled with a devastating event of a very different kind: Hurricane Sandy. The massive storm claimed more than 40 lives in the city, flooded parts of the subway system, destroyed homes and businesses, left tens of thousands without power, and caused an estimated \$18 billion in damage.

Included in that \$18 billion was significant damage to the city's parks. The storm covered at least four of Lynden's projects with water and sewage. She knows of one park that lost thousands of evergreens because of salt and wind damage. As this story goes to press, the true extent of the damage remains unknown, as the spring bloom has only just gotten underway.

You could argue that with all of the damage, and all of the disruption, and all of the broken things in New York that need to be fixed, the city's parks don't deserve to be too high up on the list of priorities. And there's a good chance that Lynden B. Miller would take up the other side of that argument. She would tell you how parks are good for tourism, good for business, good for real estate. But mostly she'd tell you how they're good for the soul.

"I try to make parks as beautiful as I know how," Lynden says. "New York is a very hectic, noisy place. It's also a very exciting place, and we all love New York. But we can only live here because of places like Central Park. It gives people a connection with nature. It makes them feel that their city cares about them. Having beautiful places to visit that are free and that are *for them* makes them feel differently about their city. Parks are sanctuaries for people. They come in and sit down and feel like this oasis is for them."

The Pied Piper of Public Space

In January, Frank Robinson, president and CEO of the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond, Virginia, invited Lynden to his city. Over three days she met with civic and business leaders, with members of the design community, and with others who had an interest in public spaces, offering insight and advice, all with the goal, Robinson says, of helping to "inspire a greater vision of what the city could look like."

In some cities, Robinson says, citing New York and Chicago as examples, the battle to demonstrate the value of public gardens has largely been won, while other cities are in an election or an economic downturn or maybe a sequester away from debilitating cutbacks in support. That's why he invited Lynden. People listen to her, he says, because she's one of the luminaries in the field, along with Frederick Law Olmsted and her friend Betsy Rogers. It's like bringing in Martin Scorsese to talk about film, or Jane Goodall to discuss chimpanzees.

"She is like the Pied Piper articulating the importance of beauty in our lives," says Robinson. "She is so determined, and in such a constructive way. She is an example of what one person can achieve when they have a passion for what they do and a focus for what that passion can accomplish."

On Lynden's last night in Richmond, after an intense three days of meetings, Robinson thought it would be best to call off a scheduled dinner so his guest would have a chance to just relax in her hotel room. Lynden, wondering why there was a hole in her evening schedule, asked Robinson what they were going to do that night. He explained his thinking, adding, "You must be exhausted."

"I am," Lynden replied. "But I don't want to miss anything." ♦



Far left: Lynden Miller, very much at home in the Central Park Conservatory Garden. Middle: The Daffodil Project. Right: A tiny, 6,100-square-foot park between 96th and 97th Streets on Park Avenue.

