

Gregory Long

He's the man with the knack of making organisations work for specialists and public alike, and he's now bringing horticulture to life for New Yorkers

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This year Gregory Long, 67, is celebrating 25 years at the helm of the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG). Large picture windows in his corner office overlook the 17th-century virgin forest in the Bronx where, inspired by their honeymoon visit to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the botanists Nathaniel Lord Britton and his wife Elizabeth founded the garden in 1891. During Gregory's tenure as the eighth president of NYBG, the 250-acre garden, bisected by the Bronx River, has been totally revitalised through a series of three seven-year plans, during which its main, glass-domed Enid A Haupt Conservatory was restored along with the construction of new utilitarian glasshouses, a visitors' centre, a handsome rehousing of its vast library and herbarium, and the creation of individual display gardens.

Sitting on his office work table is his grandmother's porcelain Imari cachepot, which he once broke and glued together as a child. It is a genuine touchstone with his past in Kansas City, Missouri, where he was born into what he describes as a "plain Presbyterian Calvinist family" and where he recalls memorable childhood visits to the city's Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. He was still young when the family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he spent his school years before leaving home for New York University. There, as a polite student radical, he thrived in its international community of scholars destined, he thought, for a career as an art historian specialising in the early Italian Renaissance.

Instead he found a niche in arts administration starting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the midst of its challenging centenary year of 1970, which was at the advent of its populous wave. Fine art's loss was New York City's gain. Following a stint at the Brooklyn Museum, he oversaw development at the American Museum of Natural History and then became deputy director of the New York Zoological Society (now the Wildlife Conservation Society, or Bronx Zoo). In each case, he left in his wake tremendous growth and more public engagement.

His initiatives during his seven-year tenure as vice president of the New York Public Library transformed this research institution into an active cultural Mecca with a solid endowment, and by the time the NYBG came calling, he had come to think of himself as the good second man on the job who can make a place work both for the specialists who defined the organisation and the public at large. But NYBG's offer was

irresistible, and he understood, as a scholar himself, the urgency of its mission as a research institution "to protect the natural world and save endangered species". Although he's not a trained horticulturist or botanist, Gregory has become – having, he says, fallen under the spell of British Arts and Crafts gardening – a prominent gardener at his farmhouse in the Hudson River Valley town of Ancram in Upstate New York. (He indulged his love of architecture in his 2004 book, *Historic Houses of the Hudson River Valley 1663-1915*, about to be reissued.)

As with the other 19th-century institutions to which he's been linked, Gregory has revitalised NYBG and enhanced its international reputation in part by re-establishing its historic collections and creating new ones, as well as by making basic scientific research more accessible to the lay person. In the grand tradition of the garden's early years, he has focused on regional architects and landscape designers to refurbish and expand its 1901 Beaux-Arts Library building, and to create new and restore old gardens within the rolling acres of wooded landscape. He sees NYBG as a neutral, apolitical platform where all kinds of people meet each other; a community of inclusion located, as a plus, in New York City's least-affluent borough.

Gregory relishes the garden's innovative exhibitions of horticulture as cultural history. After researching and then installing plant displays in the Conservatory that are based around historical figures, such as Emily Dickinson, Charles Darwin and Claude Monet, or places, including Padua and the Alhambra, NYBG embellishes the visual experience with related lectures, literary displays and musical programmes. This makes horticulture come alive for the public. □

NEXT MONTH

Nigel Colborn, the former presenter of *Gardeners' World*, who was awarded the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour in 2013.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Groundbreakers: Great American Gardens & The Women Who Designed Them, the NYBG's summer exhibition, will explore the accomplishments of the women who emerged as influential landscape architects, designers, and garden photographers and writers in the early 20th century.

17 May – 7 September, nybg.org

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