

The Bronx is Blooming... and Buzzing!

By Kimberly Rancourt, Bronx is Blooming



Many people are surprised to learn that The Bronx is the greenest of New York City's five boroughs, with about a quarter of its area designated as parkland. Large parks such as Pelham Bay Park, Van Cortlandt Park, and Bronx Park offer respite from the city's urban environment for both people and wildlife. However, much of this green space is concentrated in the northern part of the borough. In the underserved neighborhoods of the South Bronx, there is significantly less parkland, open space, and tree cover, which—along with far fewer resources to care for parks—results in a lack healthy vegetation to provide shade, mitigate the heat island effect, combat air pollution, and create beautiful, welcoming spaces for residents and wildlife.

At The Bronx is Blooming, we are working to address these long-standing inequities by growing and supporting a culture of environmental stewardship in The Bronx. Our two core programs, the Program for Leaders Advancing their Community's Environment (PLACE) and Grow, Revitalize, Engage, Educate, Nurture (GREEN) help to strengthen our communities and promote youth development while revitalizing community parks, enhancing local habitat, and increasing biodiversity.

PLACE employs local youth to lead restoration projects and engage communities in the care of their parks, while preparing them for higher education and jobs in the green economy. Our approach flips the mentor structure usually seen in under-resourced communities: Bronx college students are trained in horticulture, leadership, and project management skills before becoming mentors to local high school students. Mentors



help train students and then support them as they lead groups of volunteers in stewarding trees, removing invasive species, and planting native species. In addition to creating a healthier, greener Bronx, PLACE helps Bronx youth become more actively engaged citizens who are better able to address the needs of their communities.

“PLACE expanded my existing interest in environmental justice issues, deepened my understanding of urban planning in the Bronx, and gave me hands-on opportunities for environmental stewardship. I feel like this was a tangible way to start making the Bronx a more climate resilient borough.” - Zoe VanRabenswaay, PLACE Mentor 2022

GREEN focuses on engaging the broader Bronx community by providing civic groups, schools, and volunteer groups with hands-on environmental stewardship workshops during which participants restore park ecosystems. They learn about the environmental and public health challenges facing The Bronx—including poor air quality, the urban heat island effect, stormwater runoff and combined sewer overflows, invasive plant and insect species, the decline of pollinators—and the ways in which community members can help address them.

Through these programs, we highlight the importance of planting native, pollinator-supporting plants in Bronx parks and green spaces, rather than more traditionally-used flowering plants, such as daffodils and tulips, that provide little ecological benefit and can even be ecologically damaging. We work with thousands of volunteers each year to create and maintain pollinator-friendly gardens, while also teaching about the ecological significance of native plants and pollinators. Last year, Bronx youth, community members, and other volunteers planted more than 2,000 native flowers and more than 600 trees and shrubs in local parks.

“Volunteering in your own community makes a difference - you can better appreciate the space where you live. Personally, it helps as a therapy to clear your mind from the day-to-day-routine, putting your efforts into something that serves a purpose. Coming and learning about plants, what's native, what's not native, I never would've known any of that.” Ashley Falcon - The Bronx is Blooming Community Volunteer

We continuously evaluate which plants work best in our challenging urban environment and have found Cutleaf coneflower (*Rudbeckia laciniata*) and New York ironweed (*Veronia noveboracensis*) to be some of the most successful. Both of these plants are tough enough to grow well in compacted soils and at disturbed sites, where invasive species such as mugwort and Japanese knotweed can easily take over. We use them to border our garden beds and plant them along water features in parks where invasive species predominate.



Milkweed (*Asclepias spp.*) is another key plant in our gardens as it is the sole food source for the caterpillar of the beloved monarch butterfly, which was recently classified as endangered due to population declines resulting from habitat destruction and climate change. We make sure to plant milkweed varieties in all of our beds to support this important migratory pollinator.

We have started “green mulching” our garden beds as a natural approach to preventing the growth of competing weeds, retaining soil moisture, and limiting soil erosion. Volunteers help us plant resilient, grass-like sedges (*Carex spp.*) to provide dependable groundcover. This approach has several advantages compared to traditional wood mulch: it is less damaging to plants, more effective at preventing weed growth, is less likely to wash away in heavy rains, and requires less maintenance. Moreover, it is critical for supporting native bees, most of which nest by digging tunnels in the ground and cannot dig through wood mulch.

At The Bronx is Blooming, we believe that by mobilizing communities, especially youth, to invest in their parks and green spaces, and providing them with the tools to do so, we will achieve long-term sustainable improvements in environmental health and quality of life in Bronx neighborhoods. Participating in projects that create immediate, visible changes in parks, while learning about the broader ecological significance of this work, inspires community members to connect to and protect their natural resources. We envision our growing community of environmental stewards will play a key role in establishing a network of pollinator pathways winding through The Bronx, to keep it blooming, buzzing, and greener than ever, for many generations to come.

Note: Since 2011, under the leadership of founder and Executive Director Jennifer Beaugrand, The Bronx is Blooming has provided seasonal leadership training jobs to more than 350 Bronx students who, along with our staff and more than 20,000 volunteers, have contributed more than 120,000 hours of service in 20 Bronx community parks and green spaces. In 2022 alone, our staff, students, and volunteers contributed 20,000 hours of service to the community—the equivalent of about more than 10 park staff working throughout the year.