



GARDENS OF THE HIGH LINE

ELEVATING THE
NATURE OF
MODERN LANDSCAPES

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Timber Press



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PREFACE

The idea for a book dedicated to the High Line’s gardens originated with co-founder Robert Hammond. Robert’s offer to write the introductory chapter and provide the support of Friends of the High Line staff added immense appeal to the project. Others who’d played essential roles in making and shaping the High Line also offered to share their knowledge and insights. When our friend and graphic designer Lorraine Ferguson agreed to join us, we felt we had the team needed to produce a book that would portray the gardens beautifully and meaningfully. This is the result of that collaboration.

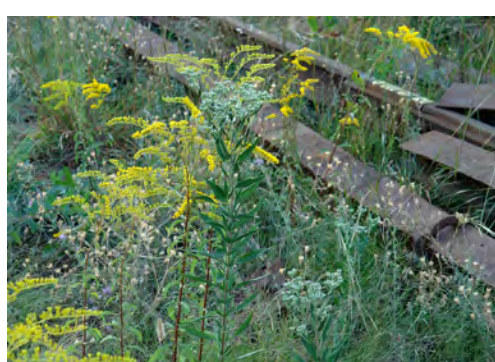
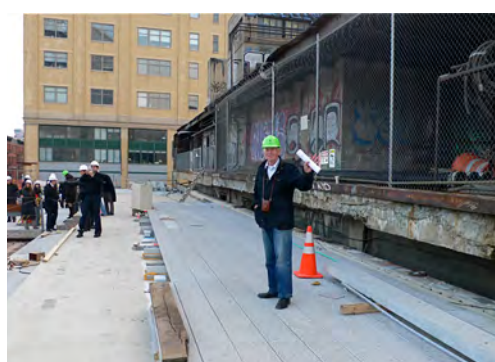
For readers just discovering the High Line and others who already know it, this book presents a journey through its gardens in all their seasons, illustrating in great detail their design, evolution, care and context. Though the journey can begin at any of the entry points, the original design intention was that it would begin by ascending the Gansevoort stair at the south end and continue north. We’ve organized this book to match that order.

Robert’s introduction is followed by a chapter titled “Elevating the Nature of Modern Landscapes.” Its purpose is to assess and illustrate revolutionary developments in industry, urban aesthetics, horticulture and ecology that led to the creation of an unprecedented urban landscape that has unique global resonance. The next section, “Gardens of the High Line,” makes up the majority of the book. It begins with a map and follows with chapters devoted to each of the High Line’s garden areas. These south-to-north portraits of place are augmented by chapters devoted to the gardens’ care, habitat value and seasonality, titled “Cutback,” “Gardening,” “Life Line” and “Seasons.”

We believe, as landscape architect James Corner has suggested, that the High Line in its totality is irreproducible: “You just can’t take it anywhere else. Its life, and the energy it has, are drawn in large measure from unique context.”¹ At the same time, we know its design ethos, the patterning of its plantings and the enlightened stewardship devoted to them is highly reproducible and broadly worthy of emulation. We hope this book will serve as a beautiful memory of a great place, as guide to the infinite opportunities it presents to practice the art of observation and as an inspiration to all who, publicly or privately, seek to elevate the nature of modern landscapes.

Heart-leaved aster (*Aster cordifolius*), hairy alumroot (*Heuchera macrorhiza* ‘Autumn Bride’), Dale’s alumroot (*Heuchera americana* ‘Dale’s Strain’)

and wild-oat (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) thrive between steel rails and riveted railings at a corner of the Northern Spur in late September.



From top, left to right: The unreconstructed High Line from its razor-wired stage (2002) through the initial visit of the design team (2004) and

Piet Oudolf's continuing observation of the site with colleagues Rick Darke and Dale Hendricks (2006).

Opposite: Landscape architect James Corner contemplating the High Line's spontaneous patterns, October 2004.



One of the most powerful impressions when we first stepped onto the High Line was the effect of nature taking over the ruin. The High Line is a massive steel and concrete structure, and so the sheer abundance of plants and even birdsong was a real surprise. The inspiration for the design was right in front of us.¹¹ — JAMES CORNER

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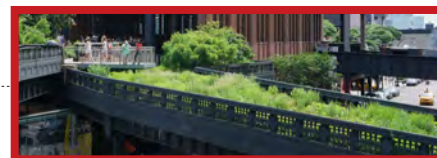
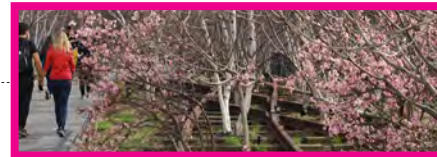
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Gansevoort Woodland is the High Line’s southernmost garden area, designed to provide the arrival experience of entering a wooded thicket. It does this beautifully and dynamically. Observant visitors will first be intrigued by dancing patterns projected on the corten steel panels bordering the stair. At the top, closely spaced gray birches (*Betula populifolia*) dominate an authentic woodland experience enlivened by the framing, opacity, translucency and qualities of line and shadowplay that are characteristic of the eastern North American forest ecosystem. Gray birch is Gansevoort Woodland’s signature tree, and it is also one of the most powerful signatures of the High Line’s gardens. This relatively small, typically multistemmed tree is a pioneer species that is often among the first to colonize sunny disturbed sites including rocky road cuts and abandoned railroad lines. Although individual stems may be short-lived, new sprouts usually replace them, extending the tree’s lifespan. Unlike many white-barked birches, gray birch tolerates the hot, dry conditions typical of urban spaces and is resistant to the bronze birch borer.

Selection and sourcing of the High Line’s plants are collaborative processes, and Piet Oudolf has always encouraged suggestions from colleagues. River birch (*Betula nigra*) was originally considered for Gansevoort Woodland. Patrick Cullina, an early advisor to the team who later became the High Line’s first head of horticulture, suggested gray birch as a more appropriately scaled alternative. The team agreed, and the next step was to find trees. The typical species form of gray birch is rarely cultivated, but Cullina knew of sources for ‘Whitespire’, a cultivated variety with exceptionally white bark. Most of the High Line’s gray birches are of this variety.

Spring shadows cast by Gansevoort Woodland tree trunks and foliage play over steel tracks and corten panels.



The layered structure of Gansevoort Woodland contributes to its all-seasons beauty and its functionality. Gray birches form the canopy layer, with dogwoods (*Cornus florida*), redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*) and shadbushes (*Amelanchier*) making up the understory. The shrub layer includes Japanese clethra (*Clethra barbinervis*) and Dawn viburnum (*Viburnum xbodnantense* ‘Dawn’). The herbaceous layer includes a diverse mix of flowering broad-leaved perennials, bulbs, grasses, sedges and ferns.

The warm glow of early evening sunlight illuminates Gansevoort Woodland in this mid-April view from one of the Whitney Museum terraces. The ever-present urban context ensures the scale of the High Line’s gardens is at once intimate and immense. Though Dawn viburnum is barely discernable from this height, its color and fragrance are inescapable delights for visitors passing by.

Overleaf: The view on foot of Gansevoort Woodland layers, taken earlier on the same day as the above.



Opposite: Each year by late April, Gansevoort Woodland is transformed by the flowering of shadbush trees. The woodland canopy allows most of the available sunlight to reach the ground, enabling the emergence and growth of plants in the herbaceous layer.

From top: The distinct bronze-green emerging leaves of shadbush are visible among clouds of snow-white flowers.

Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*) blooms in the herbaceous layer.

The diminutive daffodil (*Narcissus* 'Hawera') adds its clear lemon yellow to the mix.



WASHINGTON GRASSLANDS

Little West 12th Street to West 14th Street

The transition from Gansevoort Woodland to Washington Grasslands is graceful yet profound. The enveloping woodland canopy feathers out at its northern end, first framing the upcoming space, then easing into the drama of Washington Grasslands’ sunny openness. For visitors walking north on the High Line this is the first in a sequence of surprises that occur as the unique character of each garden area is revealed.

Many gardens frame and organize their transitions by introducing structures such as arbors, trellises, walls or buildings. The High Line’s gardens benefit from the existing structure of the elevated railway and the infinitely varied architecture of its urban surround. This organizing context is creatively integrated, and much of the gardens’ introduced structuring is accomplished with plantings.

Employing the truly organic architecture of plants to define garden spaces is a creative way of increasing ecological functionality. Enclosures, frames and reveals made of plants double as machines for replenishing atmospheric oxygen and sustaining wildlife with food and shelter. Unlike steel, bricks and mortar, the color, form, scent, sound and opacity of organic architecture changes with seasons. The malleability of plantings is equally important, providing less-costly options for adjusting the organization and material character of garden spaces in response to changing context. The High Line’s design principles anticipated this need in suggesting that the gardens remain perpetually unfinished and that they sustain changes in plant growth over time.

Since the High Line’s initial opening in 2009, Washington Grasslands has already evolved. It was originally conceived as a garden with a grassy signature. Autumn moor grass (*Sesleria autumnalis*) was placed prominently in and around the islandlike area on the south side of The Standard hotel, with purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*), prairie June grass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) planted in greater numbers to the north. Autumn moor grass has thrived and purple moor grass has persisted, however prairie June grass and little bluestem proved ill-adapted to shade north of the hotel that has increased due to new construction along the east side of the High Line. Responding to change as opportunity, the design of the herbaceous layer has evolved to a less-grassy mix.

The most obvious signature of Washington Grasslands is now Grace smokebush (*Cotinus ‘Grace’*), a hybrid between European smokebush (*Cotinus coggygria*) and the southeastern North American native smokebush (*Cotinus obovatus*). Grace smokebush is a subtle presence in early spring, leafing out later than many woody plants, but is an electrifying presence in the sun-lit southern portion in later seasons.

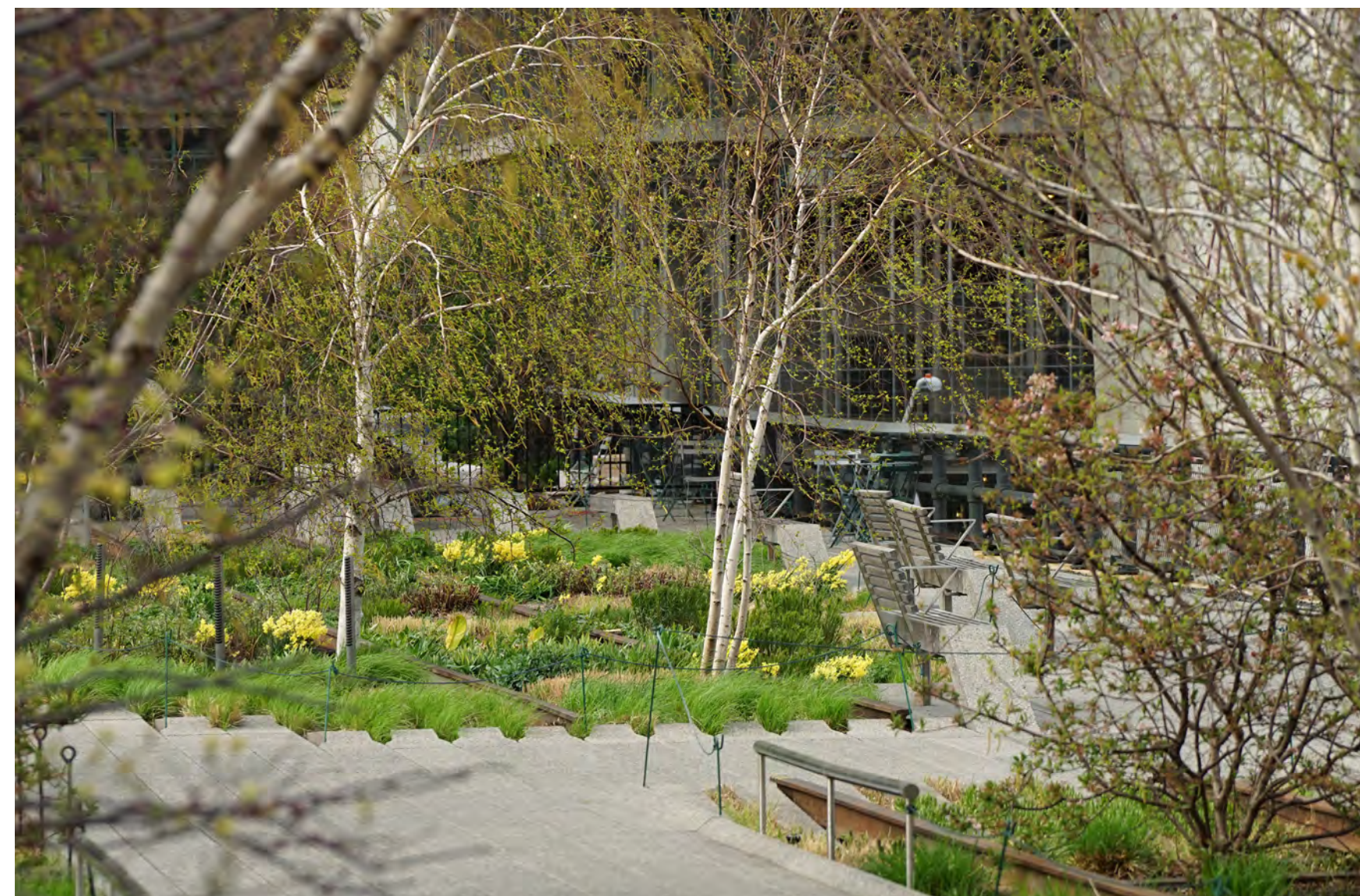
One river birch is visible in the woodland edge as the experience progresses from intimate enclosure to exhilarating expansiveness.



The stature and variety of the High Line's plantings belie the fact that the entire landscape is essentially a green roof. Soil depth ranges from about 9 inches to 48 inches, however the deeper soil is only in a few areas such as the Tiffany & Co. Foundation Overlook or the Flyover, where raised planters are installed or where soil has been mounded up. Typical soil depth is closer to 18 inches. In addition to this limitation, the underlying structure is much like a highway bridge, freezing more quickly and heating up more rapidly than the conventional ground plane. Because these temperature extremes are lethal for many plants normally considered hardy in the New York region, plant selection on the High Line requires constant experimentation and refinement.

The above photo of construction in 2008 illustrates the shallowness of planting beds. Soil depth is only 12–15 inches in this island area just south of The Standard hotel.

Opposite: The new spring green of autumn moor grass and the light yellow of *Narcissus* 'Hawera' brighten the ground layer in the transition from Gansevoort Woodland to Washington Grasslands in April.





Hummelo hedgenettle blooms profusely within a lime-green sweep of autumn moor grass in June on the Hudson side of Washington Grasslands.



Compass plant (*Silphium laciniatum*) towers over white stalks of rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*), purple

spikes of gayfeather (*Liatrix spicata*) and purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) in July.

The textural richness of the sunny southernmost portion of Washington Grasslands is evident in this July view looking south toward the Whitney Museum of American Art.



Grace smokebush (*Cotinus 'Grace'*) combines the best traits of both parents, producing cotton-candy-like flower clusters in early summer followed by spectacular autumn foliage,

all on a multistemmed shrub of moderate size. This view and those on the following two pages illustrate the luminous effects of late-day sunlight in June.



The High Line has helped people to rediscover the art of promenading.⁴⁹

— LISA SWITKIN



The structure, line and form of the High Line's gardens and plantings are never more beautifully revealed than in

winter. A light snow cover accentuates the effect while bringing a rare quiet and calm to the landscape. Friends of

the High Line makes every effort to keep the gardens open through winter, and it is a season not to be missed.

HUDSON RIVER OVERLOOK

West 14th Street to West 15th Street, Lower Level

Topography often makes a garden. The natural rise and fall of land add variation to any outdoor experience, with low points providing nestled enclosure and high points offering intriguing views. The High Line’s single most distinguishing feature—its elevation above the street—is a topographic one, albeit a constructed one.

It’s easy to forget that from a railroad perspective, varied topography is only a threat to efficiency: trains use less energy on level tracks. The High Line’s gardens rest on the former rail bed of the New York Central Railroad’s West Side Line. When completed in 1934, the gradient of the dual tracks running from 30th Street south past Gansevoort was approximately one percent or less; meaning the grade level changed less than one foot over a distance of 100 feet. The only exception to this was a switchback section of track that split off at 10th Avenue and 14th Street and descended to the level of spurs between 15th and 17th Streets (the northernmost is now the High Line’s Northern Spur garden). This switchback created two distinct levels and provided the opportunity to create the Hudson River Overlook and the Sundeck and Water Garden above and to the north of it.

This garden takes advantage of its proximity to the river, offering unique perspectives on historic maritime architecture and activity. Architect Kenneth Murchison’s Beaux-Arts styled Hoboken Terminal is the standout on the west bank. Built in 1907 for the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad, the copper-clad complex was restored to full operation soon after its centennial, connecting New Jersey to Manhattan by ferry and by rails running in tubes under the Hudson. On the east bank the eye is drawn to a steel arch that once framed the entrance to Chelsea Pier 54. Survivors of the *Titanic* were delivered here in 1912. Three years later the *Lusitania* departed for Liverpool and was sunk by torpedoes. The Hudson River Overlook is a superb place to contemplate the river’s essential yet conflicted role in shaping the city’s landscape and communities.

Views to the west are framed by plantings except for a balcony-like section and an area with peel-up benches toward the southern end. In initial designs this garden was conceived and referred to as a preserve featuring eastern North American native plants. Although the name “preserve” didn’t survive, the planting plan did, and today it remains almost exclusively devoted to regionally indigenous species. Various sumacs which have grown to treelike size function as the shrub and canopy layers, with a robust mix of grasses, asters and other tall-growing perennials below.

Viewed from the Hudson River Overlook, the warm light of a mid-July sunset illuminates the rebuilt copper clock tower of Hoboken Terminal on the New Jersey side of the Hudson.

