

Q&A with Meg Muckenhoupt, Author of *Boston's Gardens & Green Spaces*

1. What was the role of public spaces in Boston past?

Boston's public spaces have played many roles. The Boston Common was originally used to graze sheep, marshal troops, and hang various unpopular people. Forest Hills and Mount Auburn Cemeteries were built when Boston's graveyards were overflowing with corpses, while the Public Garden and the Back Bay Fens were created in part to remediate Boston's many sewage problems. Frederick Law Olmsted designed Franklin Park to help remedy the stress of city living by providing convenient access for urbanites to something resembling nature.

That said, the role of these places is not the same thing as the reason they were created. Boston's public spaces give the city character, and have been tourist attractions for centuries. They support populations of birds, insects, and other creatures who have lived here for millennia. They make the city a little cooler, and keep a bit of stormwater from rushing into our sewers and polluting Boston Harbor. They provide a place where we can feel closer to the earth.

2. How has Boston's geography impacted the development of the city's public spaces?

Bostonians have been making new land since the first settlement, by dumping rocks, gravel, dirt, sand, and anything else they could find into the Boston Harbor and the Charles River. This enthusiasm for blocking off natural currents and tides created a sewage crisis, which led to Bostonians creating still more new land to manage water flow, as was the case with the Public Garden and the Emerald Necklace.

3. Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, believed that a person could find a spiritual connection to the divine through an experience of nature—do you see any evidence of that today?

Of course! The easiest place to see the spiritual connection to nature is at Boston's healing gardens, where people with chronic illness and their families go to find peace. Go to the Howard Ulfelder, MD Healing Garden at Massachusetts General Hospital, or the Virginia Thurston Healing Garden in Harvard, MA. You'll see the connection.

4. With all the digging done downtown, what do you consider the city's greatest achievement?

Simply removing the highway so that Bostonians can walk to the harbor has been a stunning achievement. We were cut off from the water—the very reason the city was settled!—for too long. The physical and mental geography of the city has completely changed—as have real estate values.

5. You dedicated a whole chapter to green buildings—including green roofs in and around the city. Is this a trend that is catching on? How do green roofs benefit urban communities, and in particular Boston?

There are more green roofs in the Boston area each year—not only at places like the World Trade Center and Mass General Hospital, but in the suburbs as well.

Green roofs have many benefits, but the primary reasons builders are choosing them is that they reduce stormwater runoff and energy costs. Boston, Cambridge, Chelsea, and Somerville all have combined sewer overflows. That means that stormwater and sewage are carried in the same pipes. Usually, all that water goes to the Deer Island treatment plant—but during heavy storms, the pipes get overloaded, and the combined sewage and stormwater gets dumped into local rivers and the Boston Harbor. Boston builders are under a pressure to reduce stormwater runoff for this reason. Green roofs act like a giant sponge, and keep stormwater on-site, nourishing plants, and keeping pollution out of our harbor.

Green roofs also reduce energy costs by insulating the building, acting as a buffer against daily temperature swings. In the summer, a green roof heats up more slowly than a standard roof—which can reach more than 160°F! In the winter, it cools more slowly.

6. In your book you profile a variety of nonprofits that have worked hard to improve upon the city's public parks and open spaces. What do you want your readers to know about these groups?

I want readers to understand just how many people are working to keep Boston green! Great public spaces don't just happen; they need advocates to bring them into being. My book gives the names of several umbrella organizations such as the Massachusetts Audubon Society and the Boston Natural Areas Fund. If you want to get involved, these larger groups are a good place to start; the volunteers and staff are generally involved with smaller, more local organizations as well.

7. In your book you also cover community gardens, where residents tend their own crops. How do these gardens benefit a community?

First of all, they give the community access to fresh, nutritious produce. Many urban neighborhoods lack access to markets with fresh vegetables—areas that activists refer to as “food deserts.” Community gardens also bring people together. You see your neighbors when you work on a plot, and there's always something in the garden to talk about. Many gardens sponsor festivals or plant swaps as well. And, of course, community gardens also make a neighborhood more beautiful!

8. In your opinion, what is the most underutilized public space in Boston?

Allandale Woods. Everyone goes to the Arnold Arboretum a block away—and the fact that the entrances to Allandale are hidden behind buildings doesn't help. But it's a gorgeous place, and it deserves more visitors.

9. Which gardens/sites would you recommend to people who want to learn about the flora of New England?

If you want to learn about New England flora, there is no better place to start than the New England Wild Flower Society's Garden in the Woods. Plants from all over the region are ordered and identified by habitat, and the volunteers and staff are ready to handle any kind of question.

The natural history of the region?

The Massachusetts Audubon Society is the best bet for learning about the natural history of New England—not only the geological underpinning of our rocky soil, but also how interdependent communities of plants, animals, and people have developed over time. The Audubon Sanctuaries have great educational programs for all ages. If you happen to be passing through central Massachusetts, the Harvard Forest dioramas are exquisitely rendered depictions of how the New England landscape has changed since European settlement.

10. What inspired you to write *Boston's Gardens & Green Spaces*?

Boston's landscape has changed dramatically in the last decade—yet most guide books mention the Emerald Necklace and stop there, as though the city stopped changing in 1890. I wanted to recognize and celebrate the variety of Boston's green spaces.

11. How did you select the sites in your book?

My first priority was that a site be interesting—historically significant, well-designed, with enough things to look at or space to move that children would be comfortable. My second priority was to make sure that these places could be accessed by public transportation from downtown Boston. That wasn't possible for some sites (the New England Wild Flower Society's Garden in the Woods comes to mind), but most of them fit the bill. We all need to spend less time driving and more time outside.

12. Do you have a favorite garden or public space?

There are so many to choose from! I have a soft spot for urban wilds—those out-of-the-way places in the city that aren't supposed to look neat and tidy. I'm fond of Belle Isle Marsh and Allandale Woods. I enjoy Ramler Park in the Fenway, just for the flowers and the birds. I like parks that genuinely serve the community; I enjoy seeing how many people enjoy the Boston Common and Post Office Square.