Great Trees of Wave Hill

SELF-GUIDED TOUR

Trees are essential to Wave Hill’s landscape. They provide a constant backdrop to the ever-changing garden plantings. They frame our magnificent views of the Hudson and the Palisades. And they offer food and shelter for wildlife and welcome shade for our visitors in summer.

This self-guided walking tour highlights a selection of our most notable trees. Some are truly venerable and may have been here since before Wave Hill became an estate in the 1840s. More recent additions, by virtue of their character or aesthetic attributes, have established themselves as favorites of both visitors and staff.

The map on pages 12 and 13 will guide you as you stroll through the grounds and acquaint yourself with highlights from our arboreal treasures.

1 | Cutleaf Japanese Maple
(Acer palmatum ‘Dissectum Atropurpureum’)
FLOWER GARDEN, PLANTED 1978

There are many hundreds of distinct forms of the Japanese maple (Acer palmatum) and most make fine small-scale trees for restricted outdoor spaces. This slow-growing cultivar is clothed in cascades of dark-red, ferny foliage, which turns a stunning burnt-orange color in fall. The winter reveals its lovely gray bark and the intricate structure of its twisted branches.
Closely related to the redwoods of California, this species was common across several continents, including North America—from around 60 million to 15 million years ago! It was believed to be extinct and familiar to botanists only as fossilized remains, but, amazingly, a scientific expedition discovered living specimens in central China in the 1940s. The soft needles of the dawn redwood turn a coppery-brown color before dropping in the autumn, earning it the classification of deciduous conifer. As the tree ages, it develops curious “armpits” where the branches emerge from the rugged trunk.
3 | Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*)
GLYNDOR GALLERY, THREE TREES, PLANTED 1972
Also known as swamp cypress for its natural fondness for growing in swampy areas, the “bald” attribute refers to the deciduous habit of these trees. Like its neighbor the dawn redwood, it is devoid of foliage in the winter. Although native to river valleys and the coastal plains of the southeastern U.S., it is a surprisingly adaptable species and is perfectly happy here on this dry hillside in the Bronx. These three stately trees generate a calm and dignified atmosphere in front of Glyndor Gallery.

4 | Copper Beech
(*Fagus sylvatica* ‘Atropurpurea’)
GLYNDOR GALLERY, TWO TREES, PLANTED c.1910
With their smooth bark and massive spreading branches, our copper beech trees have an imposing presence all year round. Several cultivars of European beech are available, including the weeping form seen later on this tour. The copper beech is easy to identify by its rounded shape, silvery-gray bark and dark-purple foliage. Wave Hill’s two magnificent specimens have graced the property since the early twentieth century.
Bigleaf Magnolia
(*Magnolia macrophylla*)

SOUTH OF FRONT GATE, PLANTED 1975

This monumental magnolia couldn’t really have any other name; its huge leaves can be as long as 30 inches! It is native to the southeastern U.S. and brings a sub-tropical feel to this part of the garden. (In fact, our gardeners’ unofficial name for this area is “Georgia”.) In late May or early June, its enormous white flowers perfume the air. Look for its intriguing red cone-shaped fruits in the fall.
6 | Red Oak
(Quercus rubra)

GLYNDOR GALLERY,
PLANTED BY NATURE,
PRIOR TO 1850

Possibly the oldest tree
on the grounds, this magnificent red oak has been
growing here quietly since well, we’re not exactly sure,
but probably before Wave Hill became an estate in the
1840s. The tree looks impressive enough from the rear
of Glyndor Gallery but, when viewed from the Abrons
Woodland Trail below, its age and immensity
can be fully appreciated.

7 | Upright European Hornbeam
(Carpinus betulus ‘Fastigiata’)

LOWER LAWN, BELOW PERGOLA, PLANTED 1974

The European hornbeam is a handsome, dense tree
with smooth, silver-gray bark. This cultivar is an
upright (fastigiate) form, with multiple branches that
arch upwards in an even pattern. Imposing at all times
of the year, it is especially fascinating on clear winter
days when bright sunlight catches the rippled bark
and the branches cast dramatic shadows on the ground.
9 | Sweetgum  
*Liquidambar styraciflua*  
IN FRONT OF WAVE HILL HOUSE,  
THREE TREES, PLANTED c.1930  
The native sweetgum is a vigorous  
tree that may grow into an impressive  
specimen in less than a century, as the  
three examples on this lawn demonstrate.  
Its distinctive, star-shaped leaves and abundant, spiny  
fruits make this an easy tree to identify, and the persistent  
“gum balls” can be spotted throughout the fall into winter.  
The botanical and common names refer to the fragrant,  
resinous sap extracted from beneath the bark.

8 | Weeping Beech  
*Fagus sylvatica* ‘Pendula’  
NORTH OF PERKINS VISITOR CENTER, PLANTED 1974  
The weeping habit of this European beech provides a  
pleasing contrast to the more familiar profile of the trees  
nearby. Its graceful branches sweep to the ground and its  
silhouette is like that of an elegant lady in a formal ball  
gown. As with any fashionable lady’s attire, the color  
changes through the seasons: in spring, it emerges a soft  
pale green then slowly darkens to a lustrous olive. In fall,  
warm copper tones keep it in vogue for many weeks.  
However, winter presents a very different aspect; devoid  
of foliage, its weirdly twisting branches evoke an air of  
dark mystery.
Japanese Stewartia
(*Stewartia pseudocamellia*)

CONIFER SLOPE, PLANTED 1972

One of the loveliest small trees for a garden, the Japanese stewartia is attractive throughout the year. White, camellia-like flowers appear in midsummer when few other trees are in bloom, and flowering continues for several weeks. Fall foliage provides a spectacular show of orange-red and burgundy. In addition, its bark exfoliates in a beautiful, mottled pattern that can be readily appreciated in winter. As the tree ages, the bark becomes smoother and more distinctive.
11 | Giant Sequoia
(*Sequoiadendron giganteum* ‘Hazel Smith’)
CONIFER SLOPE, PLANTED 1972

Yes, this is the Bronx, not the high Sierras of California, but this truly is a giant sequoia! The blue-gray (glaucous) forms, like ‘Hazel Smith,’ are somewhat harder than the species and better suited to our northeastern climate. This magnificent conifer was raised from cuttings sent to Wave Hill approximately 40 years ago by Hazel Smith, the former owner of Watnong Nursery in New Jersey. Perhaps in a thousand years or so its stature will rival that of its western brethren.

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12 | Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*)
WAVE HILL HOUSE LAWN, EAST,
DATES FROM EARLY/MID 19TH CENTURY

This black cherry tree is an exceptionally large example of its kind. Black, or wild, cherry, is commonly found in forests and gardens, but very seldom achieves the grandeur it displays here. If not felled young for its lovely wood grain, the species often falls prey to wood-rotting diseases that hollow out the main trunk. With regular care, we hope it will grace the lawn here for many more years.
13 | American Elm
(Ulmus americana)
WAVE HILL HOUSE LAWN, EAST,
PLANTED EARLY/MID 19TH CENTURY

Old and mighty, this is one of the largest American elms in New York City. Its distinctive, vase-like shape and adaptable nature made it one of the most popular street trees in the U.S., but the species was devastated by Dutch elm disease in the 1930s. This particular tree may have survived because of inherent resistance. In fall, the foliage turns a spectacular bronze color.

14 | Cutleaf Staghorn Sumac
(Rhus typhina ‘Laciniata’)
WILD GARDEN, PLANTED EARLY 20TH CENTURY

This cutleaf form of the native staghorn sumac was probably one of the original plants selected for this hillside garden. Sumac is commonly considered a weed of roadsides and abandoned fields, and it tends to spread rather vigorously by underground root suckers. Here in the Wild Garden, the delicate foliage and weird-looking contorted stems add indispensable character to the naturalistic planting design. It is carefully pruned to keep it from overstepping its bounds and blocking the view to the lower gardens and the Hudson River.
Fastigiate English Oak
(*Quercus robur* ‘Fastigiata’)

WILD GARDEN, PLANTED 1974

The English oak is a large, spreading tree native to Europe, northern Africa and western Asia. This cultivar was selected for its unique, narrow habit. It presents a beautiful silhouette against the sky, marking the highest point at Wave Hill. Its acorns and small leaves, with their typical, oak-leaf lobes, are instantly recognizable as a common motif in architecture and interior design.
Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*)

WAVE HILL HOUSE LAWN, EAST, PLANTED EARLY 19TH CENTURY

One of the venerable Wave Hill trees that may well be older than 150 years, this sugar maple has seen residents come and go, and may even remember when the land sloping down towards the Hudson River was all pasture. The sap of this species is used to make maple syrup. Approximately 35 gallons of sap, when boiled down, will yield one gallon of syrup.
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Images used in this brochure were taken by Wave Hill staff and by Joshua Bright.

Wave Hill is a public garden and cultural center in the Bronx overlooking the Hudson River and Palisades. Its mission is to celebrate the artistry and legacy of its gardens and landscapes, to preserve its magnificent views and to explore human connections to the natural world through programs in horticulture, education and the arts.