

In the Fight Over N.Y.C. Sidewalks, Tree Beds Are the Smallest Frontier

In a city with little private green space, tree beds on public streets have become coveted territory. But who gets to decide how they're used?

By Jane Margolies

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Over 660,000 trees line the streets of New York City, and the beds around them take up more than 400 acres, according to a city estimate. While many people just walk by the rectangular openings in the sidewalk from which the trees spring — or, worse, use the spaces as trash cans and doggy litter boxes — others lay claim, unofficially, to these pocket-size patches of land.

As the weather warms, these caretakers swing into action.

They plant flowers, post signs to ward off dog owners, and fashion fences from broomsticks, linoleum tiles and old skateboards. Some create mini memorials to departed loved ones.

It all makes sense. In a concrete jungle where few residents have yards, the tiny parcels offer New Yorkers a rare chance to dig into the soil, connect with nature and make something beautiful grow.

“The tree bed is the unsung hero of the urban forest,” said Andrea Parker, executive director of the Gowanus Canal Conservancy, which has “ambassadors” in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn who watch over young trees and fill their beds with native plants. “If we’re going to build a robust tree canopy for the city, we need to be thinking about the ground and caring for the ground.”

Not everyone is enthralled with such ad hoc acts of stewardship, though. After a picket fence was erected around a tree on the Upper East Side not long ago, a man ripped it out to make it easier for his dog to do its business. He was hauled into court.



Len Maniace, who organizes the Tree LC team for the Jackson Heights Beautification Group, uses a lopper to trim a tree. Emma Rose Milligan for The New York Times

Pooch pee and poop, it must be said, can harm plants, not to mention create hazards for those who work the soil.

Street trees are city property, even if a private citizen or building owner has planted them. They are under the jurisdiction of the Parks Department, which runs workshops teaching tree bed care and has ramped up its planting, especially in poor neighborhoods. It added nearly 15,000 street trees during the 2023 fiscal year, while borough presidents, City Council members and nonprofit groups have called for more.

As it plants, the department has been enlarging tree beds, formerly no more than 5 feet by 5 feet but now often 5 by 10 or even longer; the roomier accommodations let roots spread and can absorb more storm water.

With rising temperatures and more frequent, intense storms driven by climate change, street trees have become increasingly important: They provide shade, lower ambient temperatures, absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen.

Tree beds can also get personal.

Elijah V. Irvin grew up on West 150th Street in Hamilton Heights. As a boy, he would run to and from a community garden on his block, taking particular interest in a Japanese zelkova tree near Broadway, said Signe Mortensen, a neighbor involved with maintaining the garden and tree beds.

“He was really curious, smart, shy,” she said.

As he got older, Elijah got into computers and drill rap. He had gained fame for music videos he created under the name Edot Baby when he died, unexpectedly, at age 17 two years ago.

Beside themselves with grief, his family and friends turned the bed around his favorite tree into a memorial, building a wooden guard and writing messages and his lyrics on it. Someone spray-painted hearts.

Elijah’s mother, Tanya Gabriel, sometimes sits nearby.

“Every time I go past, it makes me think of him,” she said.

In some neighborhoods, groups have formed to care for street trees and their little plots of land.

Elena Petkova-Schulze began planting free bulbs from the Daffodil Project in tree beds on West 119th Street in Harlem in 2018, only to discover that someone else on her block was doing the same thing. Now there are 85 people in a WhatsApp group for the area, and they have a tree bed map and a spreadsheet where they track the trees’ conditions.



John Candell, part of the Jackson Heights Beautification Group, picks up litter as part of regular tree-bed maintenance. Emma Rose Milligan for The New York Times

The Jackson Heights Beautification Group has a volunteer team called Tree LC, which meets weekly in Queens. On a recent Saturday morning, some people pruned trees while others removed trash from beds on 37th Avenue, a bustling commercial drag in the neighborhood. Then they reconvened at a cafe for lunch.

“It’s a social thing, too,” said Len Maniace, the group’s organizer.

Some people accessorize tree beds with pink flamingos, planter boxes, hand-painted stones and, less whimsically, bait stations made of boxy black plastic or shaped like gray rocks — intended for the rats that sometimes leave gaping holes in the dirt after tunneling out of underground burrows. The bait stations don’t accomplish much, experts say.

“It’s just something buildings do to pretend they’re attacking the problem,” said Samuel A. Bishop II, education director at the nonprofit group Trees New York, which offers popular “Citizen Pruner” classes.

Julie Menin, a councilwoman on Manhattan’s East Side, has been trying to smoke rats out of her district by having an exterminator pump carbon monoxide into their holes.

Another nonprofit organization, Big Reuse, has been trying to help seed a new generation of tree-bed stewards.

Gil Lopez, an event and volunteer coordinator, arrived at Middle College High School in Long Island City on a recent morning, bringing tools, gloves and bins of compost. He showed 10th- and 11th-graders how to break up — or aerate — hard, compacted soil so that rainwater could seep to the roots in tree beds behind the school.

Ximena Morales, 15, used a three-pronged hand cultivator to loosen dirt before compost was spread on top. “It’s hard for the trees, but there’s stuff we can do,” she said.

Once trees are established, they are pretty much on their own, except for periodic pruning by the Parks Department, with the result that people often trample the dirt around them or cover it with brick, stone or concrete. Some people chain bikes to trunks or forget to remove Christmas lights that can strangle trees as they grow.

“Every tree bed is like a C.S.I. site,” said Matthew López-Jensen, an artist whose work has featured photographs of trees.

Tree guards — the low fences around beds — help discourage people from stepping on the dirt. Some guards echo building architecture; see the curvy ones at 520 West 28th Street in Chelsea, for example. Others are traditional, black-painted iron.

But iron guards can cost \$1,200 or more. Lincoln Restler, a Brooklyn councilman, has been working with Big Reuse on a D.I.Y. kit with steel posts and pressure-treated wood rails that would cost \$275, with a pilot installation planned in his

district this spring.



To keep a tree branch from falling on a nearby vehicle, Sherif Sadek, center, holds it while Anne Valk, right, gets to work pruning. Emma Rose Milligan for The New York Times

Almost any kind of guard is preferable to impenetrable walls of brick or stone that some landlords erect around beds and then fill with soil, experts say. The fortresses block rainwater from flowing off a sidewalk into a bed, and piling soil around a tree's trunk can rot the bark and lead to disease.

Some gardeners hatch ambitious plans for tree beds.

Ian Resler, a Greenpoint resident, submitted drawings for a bed to his condo board and got a budget approved, then surrounded its Japanese lilac with plants and added a solar-powered lantern and a copper birdbath.

Mr. Resler said neighbors have praised his miniature garden, but that he has also had to fish out beer cans and once felt compelled to speak to someone who was letting his pit bull jump over the tree guard and kick up dirt after it had relieved itself.

“This kind of thing lets you meet your neighbors, good and bad,” he said.

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