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BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

## Spring Books: Gardening

Books on the history of New York's Central Park plus a celebration of Midwest park-builders Hare & Hare.

*By Barbara Paul Robinson*

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Few remember that in the 1960s and '70s Central Park was a lawless, derelict, graffiti-covered no-man's land, shunned by most New Yorkers as being far too dangerous and scary to enter. In her forthright and fascinating **"Saving Central Park" (Knopf, 301 pages, \$30)**, Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, founder and spearhead of the Central Park Conservancy, recounts the story of how she, as a recent Wellesley graduate with an advanced degree in urban planning, settled in Manhattan in 1964, fell in love with the city's "masterpiece of landscape design," and soon burned with a passion to reclaim it for all New Yorkers. Passages quoted from her personal journals make vivid the challenges she faced navigating the shoals of city politics and raising private money for restoration projects. Her dogged campaign culminated when, in 1979, the mayor named her Central Park administrator and she created a private, not-for-profit conservancy to manage the park under license from the city. This private-public partnership, then without precedent, is now the model of urban-parks management in New York and throughout the world.

As accomplished a writer of landscape history as she is an administrator, Ms. Rogers has written not only a personal memoir but also a concise, anecdotal history of Central Park, from its conception in the 1850s to the thriving green space that we know today. Other recent publications concentrate more closely on the park's early decades, chief among them **"The Central Park: Original Designs for New York's Greatest Treasure" (Abrams, 229 pages, \$50)** by Cynthia S. Brenwall, curator of the Central Park collection of the New York City Municipal Archives. Choosing from the archive's more than 1,500 drawings and plans, Ms. Brenwall includes a splendid three-panel gatefold of the commission-winning 1858 proposal for the park by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, as well as later drawings proving that, in Olmsted's words, "every foot of the park's surface, every tree and bush, as well as every arch, roadway, and walk has been

fixed where it is with a purpose.”

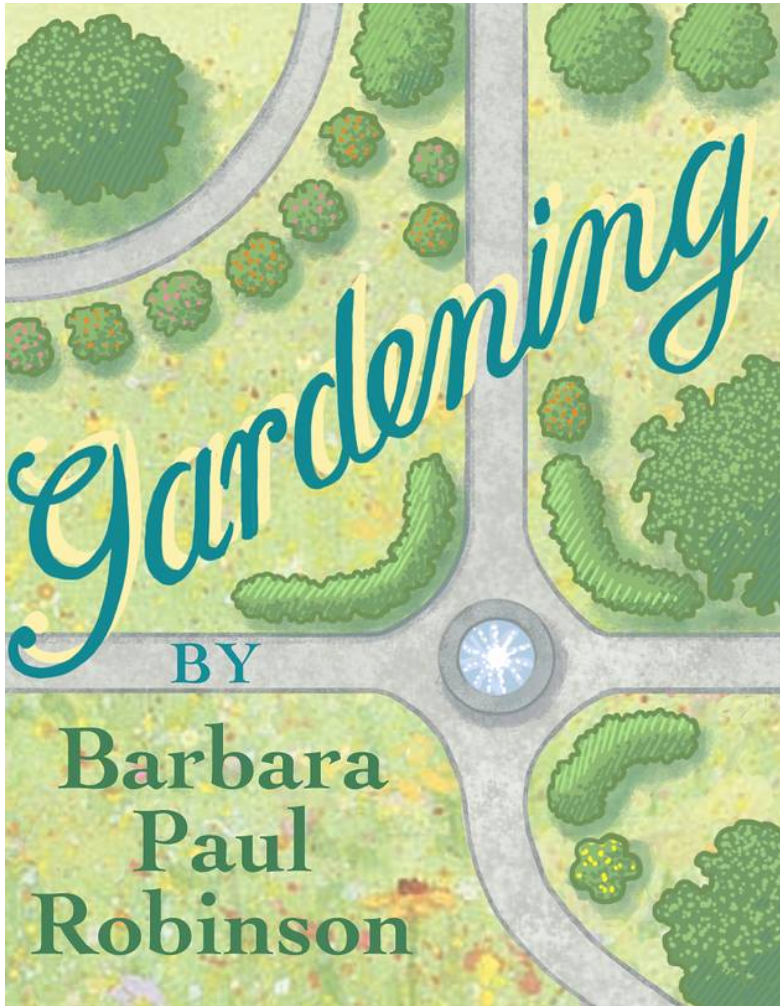


ILLUSTRATION: ELIZABETH TRAYNOR

Also of interest is an attractive facsimile reissue of Clarence C. Cook’s **“Description of the New York Central Park”** (Washington Mews/NYU, 206 pages, \$25), an illustrated walking-tour published in 1869, when the park was still under construction. As Maureen Meister notes in an introduction, Cook (1828-1900), an art critic for the New York Tribune, wrote not just a travelogue of the park but also a defense of its creators’ aesthetic: At the time of the book’s publication, proposals were on the city’s table to add monumental

sculptures and elaborate Empire-style gates to the park, which were at odds with Vaux and Olmsted’s plans for a public space that was not about art and ornament but instead about, in Vaux’s phrase, “Nature first, 2nd and 3rd.”

Finally, for a charming picture-book history of the park, great for both children and adult readers, see Ashley Benham Yazdani’s **“A Green Place to Be”** (Candlewick, 40 pages, \$17.99). Ms. Yazdani’s pencil-and-watercolor illustrations and playful text remind us that Vaux and Olmsted “had each been many things” by 1872, the year they completed their work in Central Park, but for ever after were a team of “park makers.” And who were their many and beautiful parks made for? “They were made for you.”

While Vaux and Olmsted have become household names, Sidney and Herbert Hare have not, although they too did important work in American landscape architecture. The

largely self-taught Sidney (1860-1938) was a pioneer in the modern-cemetery movement in Kansas City, Mo., designing innovative graveyards that doubled as meditative arboretums. Thanks to the railroad and the automobile, the Gilded Age Midwest was growing rapidly, and Sid, his work much in demand, soon found himself specializing in plans for tree-lined boulevards for the booming cities of the lower Missouri River Valley. After 1910 he was joined by his son, Herbert (1888-1960), who, after studying under Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. at Harvard, expanded the family business into designing public parks, subdivisions and private estates in Kansas, Missouri, Texas and beyond. The Hares' personal histories, fertile collaborations and impressive legacy are handsomely showcased in **"Hare & Hare, Landscape Architects and City Planners"** (247 pages \$39.95), a lost chapter in urban-design history brought to light by Carol Grove and Cydney Millstein and published by the **University of Georgia Press** with the **Library of American Landscape History**.

*—Ms. Robinson is the author, most recently, of "Heroes of Horticulture: Americans Who Transformed the Landscape."*

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