

Wilcox Park Arboretum

Wilcox Park in Westerly, Rhode Island, is more than just a picturesque green space. It is a nationally recognized arboretum with a rich horticultural legacy. Originally designed by renowned landscape architect Warren H. Manning in 1898, the park was envisioned as a tranquil walking park for the community. Over time, it has evolved into a vibrant living museum of trees, home to 159 different tree species and 43 unique cultivars, including seven Rhode Island Champion Trees recognized by the RI Tree Council.

In February 2025, Wilcox Park reached a new milestone with its designation as a Level II Arboretum by ArbNet, an international network that accredits arboreta for their commitment to tree conservation, education, and public engagement. This recognition places Wilcox Park among only five arboreta in Rhode Island to achieve Level II status the highest achieved in the state. This recognition underscores the Park's horticultural significance and educational value. One of the key criteria for this designation is the Park's active public programming, led in large part by volunteers from the URI Master Gardener Program. Other requirements are to maintain an up-to-date inventory of the trees and to have a Collections Policy to manage the tree selection over time.

Wilcox Park was established through the generosity of Harriet Wilcox, who donated the land in memory of her husband Stephen Wilcox, a prominent inventor and philanthropist. Manning, a former associate of Frederick Law Olmsted and the first president of the American Society of Landscape Architects, crafted a design centered on an open meadow framed by gently sloping terrain. This central feature, which remains a hallmark of the park's design, was intended to showcase majestic trees allowed to grow without restriction. Today, Wilcox Park functions as an accessible and richly informative arboretum. Approximately one-third of its trees are labeled with genus, species, and common name, allowing visitors to identify and learn from the plantings. A comprehensive, searchable tree database is accessible via the QR code below, and posted at the circulation desk, on the website and at the Kiosk in the Park, linking guests to a digital map of tree species and cultivars. Master Gardeners offer monthly guided tours from June through October, and self-guided tour brochures are available at the Circulation Desk and online (below) for those who prefer to explore independently.





Wilcox Park's collection includes both native and exotic species, representing a broad range of hardwoods and conifers. Highlights include a grove of dawn redwoods (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), the cherry allée (*Prunus × yedoensis*), and rare cultivars such as the champion tiger eye pine (*Pinus wallichiana*). The park's Champion Trees—exceptional specimens recognized for their size—are a particular draw. Disease management and planned succession planting help protect the integrity of the tree population, especially the aging beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica*) threatened by fungal infections.

The arboretum is maintained by a dedicated team of staff and volunteers, including 2 certified arborists under the guidance of the Park Committee to guide ongoing preservation efforts, ensuring that the original vision of Manning and subsequent designers is respected and revitalized.

As a Level II Arboretum and a nationally recognized historic landscape, Wilcox Park serves both as a place of natural beauty and as a vital educational resource. It invites the public to connect with trees, history, and horticulture in a serene downtown setting—just as Harriet Wilcox hoped over a century ago.

By Joan Sienkiewicz, Master Gardener

