

Wilcox Park Esplanade

Wilcox Park was designed in 1898 as a Victorian strolling park by Warren H. Manning, an associate of Frederick Law Olmsted. The design was in the naturalistic style of the period with the stone wall enclosure, walking paths, and an open meadow in the center.

After the new Town Hall was built in 1912, the Association wanted a more formal space to compliment the Italianate design of the library. Arthur A. Shurcliff designed the formal terrace, or Esplanade. Down to and around the Wilcox Memorial Fountain, including the Westerly blue granite balustrade, bluestone paving pattern, octagonal fountain basin, and adjacent stone benches. The Esplanade is the only space in the 15-acre park with perfect symmetry and formal hardscape attributes. Here, an unobstructed site line exists between the steps of the Town Hall straight through to the fountain. The Esplanade Garden was initiated in 2020, thanks to a private donor.

The evergreen borders provide the structure and formality in keeping with that space and provide a year-round formal look, particularly lovely in the snow. A yew hedge defines the perimeter of the Esplanade. Twelve key points along this hedge are an upright form of yew. Each of the eight garden plots has low holly hedging. A dwarf Hinoki cypress is at the center of each bed.

The 8 garden beds are also designed in the style of the period. Beatrix Farrand, a contemporary of Manning and Olmsted and America's first female landscape architect, designed Eolia at Harkness Memorial State Park and the sunken garden at Hill-Stead in Farmington, CT. In those, as well as in her numerous other designs, Farrand made extensive use of perennials, and her work served as a model for these gardens.



The Esplanade can be seen as one large garden, 4 separate gardens, or 8 gardens. The 4 gardens can be seen as an open book, with the grass path as the spine. The plantings emphasize this - the plantings are mirror images, from bed to bed and side to side, like pages. At the smallest level, the garden is an open book.

While they are not strictly formal beds, the simplicity of plant selection and the repetition of patterns from bed to bed give it plenty of structure. The color palate is bold and bright, but the plant selection is limited. Nothing is too tall, especially along the edges, so the garden is “legible” from many angles and viewing areas. The plants selected are sustainable and are long bloomers, especially with deadheading for a second bloom. The gardens are maintained by a team of volunteers, led by a URI Master Gardener.

The centerpiece is a compass rose, composed of Mountain Rose granite from Canada, which is as close to Westerly red granite as is available in North America. The fixed compass is set to True North, 13 degrees west of magnetic north.

The Esplanade is a crowning feature of the Westerly Library and Wilcox Park, visible to all who pass by and enter from the heart of downtown. It is an excellent example of the care and dedication of Association staff and volunteers who nurture and maintain this magnificent space.

By Sandi Carmichael, Park Committee member and Master Gardener

