Sunlight is a prerequisite. Add in a little carbon dioxide, some water, and nitrogen from a good electrical storm, and, as we all learned in grade school, that’s how your garden grows. But what happens in an urban environment where skyscrapers often obscure the sunlight and cast a shadow?

Made in the Shade: NYU’S URBAN GARDEN

George Reis, NYU’s head gardener and supervisor of sustainable landscaping, understands that successful gardening begins with natural methods for growing plants native to New York City, which don’t require as much sunlight or supplemental water and have evolved to thrive in the local climate. That is the key to sustainability. These native species can withstand extreme urban conditions without large inputs of water and chemicals. As George says, “People will always want exotic plants, and I love them, too, but the current idea of urban gardening is to reintroduce some balance.”

An Urban Shade Garden Comes to Life

George discovered that in order to create that necessary balance within his gardens, he had to turn to sustainable gardening, which focuses on organic methods that use indigenous plants to support biodiversity and resilience in the ecosystem. If you ever wonder what plant life is native to the island of Manhattan, be sure to check out the plots near Bobst Library: in 2008, inspired by the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson’s arrival in New York and a grant from that year’s graduating class, George changed them over to 100 percent native species. Since then, the garden has thrived in the urban shade.

George now maintains the 30 plots around Washington Square Park, as well as 100 street planters and the Mercer Plaza garden that runs along Mercer between West Fourth and West Third Streets.

A Gardener Connects with His Past

George is also looking forward to seeing the new landscape of NYU’s University Village, which is being designed by acclaimed landscape architect firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, known for their forward-thinking design of Brooklyn Bridge Park and other celebrated projects around New York City. The University Village Landscape Plan takes inspiration from the abstract expressionist horticultural style of Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx. Famous for his modernist landscape architecture in parks and gardens in Brazil, Burle Marx wrote all of his notes in Portuguese. It’s no accident that George himself is fluent in the language and has translated some of Burle Marx’s notes into English; before getting a Master of Science degree in landscape design at Columbia University, George graduated from NYU’s College of Arts and Science with a bachelor’s degree in Portuguese poetry.

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