The spirit of the Hudson River Valley lives not only in art and legend but also in the delicate balance of natural and human forces that have shaped the land. Together they create a special place where gardens and landscapes are both inspired and inspiring. Here you will find the views and vision that stimulated a national artistic movement, a model for land conservation practices, and historic gardens that shaped the American landscape design profession.

The Natural Environment
Millions of years of dynamic geologic forces have shaped unique landscapes. The mountains, valleys, ridges, and plateaus framing the Hudson River create one of the most spectacular landscape settings in the world. Since the beginning of its exploration, the valley environment has cast its spell upon those who have visited here. Henry Hudson arrived in 1609 seeking a northern passage to Asia but found instead “a pleasant land to see.” Two centuries later, Washington Irving described a walk along the Hudson as “a continued dream.” Others could not escape the Hudson River Valley’s enchanting effect. The published journals of European travelers following the American Grand Tour drew countless visitors to the valley’s natural wonders. English social reformer Harriet Martineau gazed upon the Hudson in transcendent delight: “I experienced a sensation which I have often heard but never quite believed in the century that one has awakened in another world.” These mystical qualities in the natural environment remain today at the heart of the region’s distinctive landscapes and gardens.

Romanticism and A.J. Downing
Inspired by the valley’s natural scenery, artists, writers, and landscape designers of the 19th century developed a national style of landscape gardening. They favored simplicity, naturalism, and emphasized 18th-century preferences for classicism, order, and nature.

A native of the Hudson River Valley, Andrew Jackson Downing, one of the most influential landscape designers in 19th-century America, wrote dozens of articles for horticultural magazines and in 1841 published his first book, A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, a rejection of the well-ordered European-style gardens in favor of picturesque gardens. Gracefully written and handsomely illustrated, this book became an immediate success, and Downing’s principles established a national style for landscapes and gardens in harmony with nature.

Downing had a profound influence on the Hudson River Valley. Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, designers of Central Park in New York City as well as other important parks across the country. As a tribute to his mentor, Olmsted and Vaux created a park in Downing’s name for Newburgh.

Masters and Masterworks
The Hudson River Valley possesses garden and landscape styles that represent changes in American tastes over a 200-year period. The valley is a treasury of prominent gardening design for the region and the nation.

Downing’s influence was preceded by that of André Le Nôtre—one of the most influential landscape designers working in 17th-century Europe. Le Nôtre wrote of the need to respect the landscape, one of the reasons he was hired by the king of France. He believed that “all art is based on nature” and that the landscape designer’s task is “to change nothing, but to give one’s self to nature.”

The 20th century heralded an era of innovation and changing attitudes in landscape gardening concepts. Industrial designer Russel Wright purchased an 80-acre tract of land that had been laid nearly bare by decades of logging and quarrying. For 10 years he cultivated this barren land, diverted a stream to fill the old quarry and create a pond, and built a house. Mantas is a model of ecological design, he said, a celebration of nature restored: “to help people experience the wonder of nature in a new and amply personal way.”

English garden designer Russell Page combined horticultural, landscape architecture, and modern sculpture into the Donald M. Kendall Sculpture Gardens at PepsiCo headquarters in Purchase. This world-class garden features more than 40 works by many international sculptors ranging from Auguste Rodin to Alexander Calder in an integrated setting of ever-changing plant colors and fragrances.

A major facet of modern landscape engineering, and a most rewarding experience, may be enjoyed in a drive along the Taconic State Parkway as you tour the valley’s landscapes and gardens. This highly acclaimed Pan-American Highway was a sophisticated interpretation of highway design and a celebration of the region’s natural beauty and agricultural heritage.

Working Landscapes
Early land use patterns shaped landscape gardening practices in the Hudson River Valley. The same land that the American Indians cleared for cultivation would one day become open space features of the region’s foreground vistas. settlement patterns followed early agricultural developments and natural landforms. In the 1700s, roads were laid down, buildings constructed, and forests substantially cleared for agriculture and timber. Those early developments established the spatial organization and circulation patterns that helped shape landscape gardening in the 1800s.

Fieldstone walls crossing the landscape, rows of orchards like those meeting the entrance to Montgomery Place in Amherst-on-Hudson, and large farming fields now preserved as open space recall the valley’s rich agricultural history and how the way we experience the land

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Upper Hudson
Washington Park, three blocks west of Empire State Plaza, Albany, washingtonpark.org—Gardens were once bordered by gravel roads and sidewalks. Situated near the banks of the Hudson River, the formal gardens were designed by Olmsted and Vaux in 1857 to celebrate the Centennial of the United States. The park included a rose garden with more than 4,000 varieties, a lily pond, a parterre, and a 185-foot-long Children’s Pond, which is stocked with goldfish in the spring. The gardens feature serpentine walks, terraces, and stone walls in the Italianate style by Francis Hoppin.

Kykuit, a blending of classical landscape and horticulture
Kykuit, a 209-seat theater of stone and steel, in the remote Hudson Highlands of New York, is the New York home of the Vanderbilts, America’s richest family, for more than 500 years. Tours of the formal gardens, which contain 21,000 plants, are offered from May through October. The gardens were designed by architect A.J. Davis, the firm of Olmsted and Vaux, and Thomas Hopper of Philadelphia.

For information on reserving the gardens, call (914) 963-8077.

Albany Ruby Gilding Cone, 4579 Albany Post Rd., 518-463-4893—The estate of the late Anthony A. Gilding Cone, who was known for his community service, has been restored. Tours are available by appointment only.

Mid-Hudson
Olana, 770 Route 9G south of Rip Van Winkle Bridge, Hudson, olana.org—Olana was home to Frederic Edwin Church from 1865 to 1894 and features the largest collection of his paintings. The 66-acre estate is landscaped with gardens inspired by Roman art, including fountains, terraces, and a Menorah, and includes extensive green scenery and waterfalls. The gardens are open daily, but closed Mondays.

Popes’ Walk, River County Road 100, Goshen—A 6.4-mile stretch of Kingston–Rhinebridge and Goshen–Woodstock roads are included in the historic Olana State Park. The scenic walk was designed in 1912 by Beatrix Farrand and is open to the public. Today, the walk is part of the Hudson Valley Parklands.

Hillwood, 4579 Albany Post Rd., 518-463-4893—This 90-acre estate was home to the Wadsworth family, who were early supporters of the arts. The gardens feature a 200-acre collection of primitive and native plants, a rose garden, an Italian garden, and a Japanese garden, all designed by Frederick W. Vanderbilt.

Bellefield, 4579 Albany Post Rd., 518-463-4893—Bellefield was a place of retreat for the Vanderbilt family, who were early supporters of the arts. The gardens feature a 200-acre collection of primitive and native plants, a rose garden, an Italian garden, and a Japanese garden, all designed by Frederick W. Vanderbilt.

Vanderbilt Mansion, 4577 Albany Post Rd., 518-463-4893—Vanderbilt Mansion was the home of the Vanderbilt family, who were early supporters of the arts. The gardens feature a 200-acre collection of primitive and native plants, a rose garden, an Italian garden, and a Japanese garden, all designed by Frederick W. Vanderbilt.

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