Our taxi cut a straight line south on Franklin Roosevelt Drive aside the endless concrete canyons on the right and the East River to the left. With a rapidly swaying turn we ascended onto the Brooklyn Bridge, seeing commending views of endless city from east to west. A few blocks later the shaded entrance of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden emerged in a park-like cloak of soothing greenery. But this no city park, it’s one of the world’s premiere public gardens. We dashed through the library entrance and reached a long-scheduled meeting just in time. The next few hours focused on ways to implement a newly hatched initiative...The International Agenda for Botanic Gardens in Conservation. After fruitful discussions and lunch we ventured into the garden, bathed in the early fall sun. Few gardens combine aesthetics, education, research and public outreach with such seamless skill and longevity. Since the spring 1911 BBG has been growing literally and figuratively into the storied institution it is today.

Having spent five years working in the tropics I was eager to see the Steinhardt Conservatory, divided into three specific habitats it’s a classic layout for education and display. The warm tropical pavilion embodied the humid organic aroma, hosting species of equatorial flora I had seen in Singapore, Thailand, India and West Africa. While it’s impossible to recreate the ecological diversity of tropical forests in a conservatory, the sense of fascination with the “jungle” is a wonderful visitor experience. The two other smaller pavilions exhibit desert and warm-temperate habitats respectively. Also housed in this complex is the C.V. Starr Bonsai Museum. This notable collection features temperate and tropical trees carefully cultivated over centuries in some cases.

Adjacent to the Steinhardt is the Lily Pond Terrace stretching east toward the Magnolia Plaza. It’s here that some of the design pedigree of BBG comes to light. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux were early designers for Prospect Park; ultimately part of that property would become BBG. In 1897 ideas for a botanic garden on the site received legislative support. Twelve years later BGG was founded. Harold Caparn was the most influential landscape architect for BBG having designed many major features visitors enjoy today. Planning for a laboratory and the original conservatory began in 1912. From very early on BBG was evolving into a botanic garden not only committed to fine ornamental horticulture, but to the understanding and conservation of plant diversity at large. In fact, the first developed garden on the site featured native plants.

Wondering north out of the formal garden spaces one encounter’s the Plant Family Collection. This is the classic interpretation of plants arranged by familial relationships. Along with medicinal plants, family collections are prominent features of early European Gardens...American gardens followed accordingly. These collections are invaluable resources for students of plant taxonomy, the science of how plants are classified...but times are changing and the grand pursuit of “plant systematics” is it self evolving. With the advent of recent scientific work at the molecular level the long established hierarchy of plant relationships is changing in several ways. Students of botany today are getting a rather different education than those of even twenty five years ago. But they have it easy compared with students of
ornithology; the evolutionary organization of birds is changing much more dramatically. BBG employs senior scientists who contribute important work in botanical research of several important plant families.

Wondering north through the conifers one comes to the Cherry Esplanade. Few public gardens in North America rival the spring bloom of this exquisite linear space. Some 200 cherry trees of differing varieties line a grand open lawn. The first trees were planted here after World War I as gift from Japan. A few years earlier many of the same species were planted at the Potomac Tidal Basin in Washington DC. Recent genetic work suggests these classic “Japanese Cherries” may in fact have their origins on the Korean Peninsula and were exported during the Japanese occupation. With a tree so revered and celebrated a bit of “political horticulture” is not entirely surprising. One thing is for sure; throughout the northern hemisphere few plants elicit the absolute joy of these noble little trees as spring arrives. BGG host a weeklong celebration called the *Sakura Matsuri* during the peak bloom. Not far south of the Cherries is the Japanese Hill and Pond Garden. This was first Japanese garden to be built in a North American public garden. It will turn one hundred years old in this year.

Next to the cherries another ornamental gem of BBG is found in the Cranford Rose Garden. Almost 1400 roses grace this remarkable collection dating from 1928. Several of the rose shrubs are original plantings. Beyond the Rose Garden is the Native Flora Garden. One might not think of highly urbanized boroughs of New York City as having a large native flora. The original landscape of greater Manhattan and Long Island hosted stately temperate oak-hickory woodlands on glacially scoured soils. Add to that the influence of an intricate coastline with the Atlantic Ocean and variable native plant habitats abound. BBG is a leader in the research and conservation of the native plants in the great New York City region.

In addition to the visiting public, BBG has extensive educational offerings for nearly everyone. In the past twenty years children’s gardens have sprung up at many public gardens. BBG created theirs in 1914; its thought to be the first garden in world created exclusively for children. For the avid gardener the BBG 21ST-Century Gardening Series books are unsurpassed in promoting ecologically responsible gardening.

BBG’s extensive collections and exceptional landscape host nearly 900,000 visitors a year. The new Visitor Center obtained the LEED Gold certification for sustainable and environmentally friend design. The combination of multiple “gardens within gardens” warrants a full day visit for any garden enthusiast. A public garden of this magnitude and quality is not to be missed...and it’s just a short taxi ride form Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge.