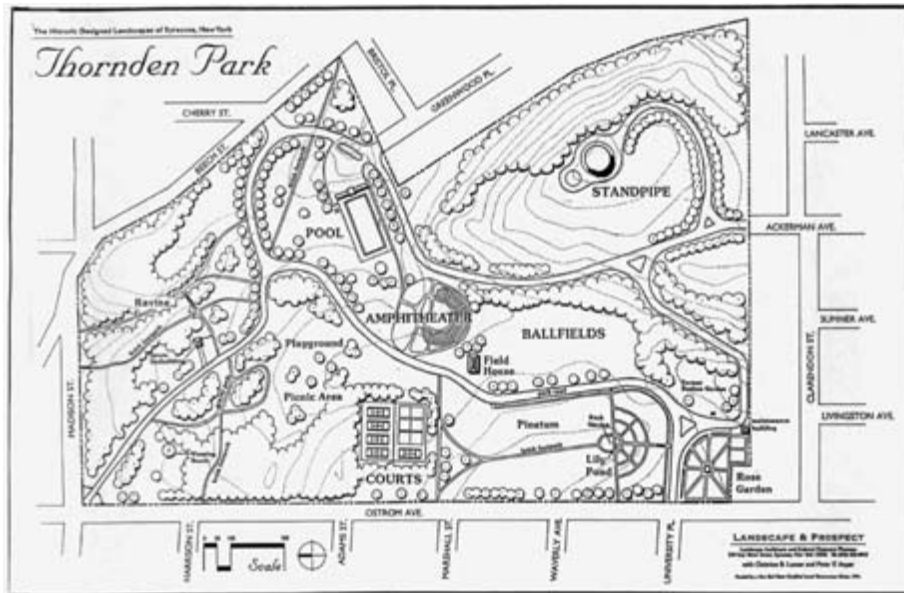


Know Your City Parks: Thornden Park



Thornden Park is a 76-acre park maintained by the Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth Programs. It is located in Syracuse's "university area," bounded by Ostrom Ave., Madison St. and South Beech St. Houses on Greenwood Place and Clarendon St. back up on the park. Syracuse University student dormitories overlook the park from directly across Ostrom Ave., and the park is but a short walk from the campuses of Syracuse University and SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

Why You Should Visit

Thornden Park combines nature, human history and recreational opportunities in a pleasing balance. The nationally-renowned E.M. Mills Memorial Rose Garden occupies a prominent corner of the park, and when its thousands of roses are in bloom, this is a treat not to be missed. For plant lovers, Thornden also features a perennial garden, herb garden, lily pond, and pinetum, which is an evergreen arboretum. The park is well-known for its variety of trees, the most numerous being Norway spruce, blue spruce, sugar maple, Norway maple, Eastern red cedar and arborvitae. Ash, basswood, black cherry, butternut, ginkgo, hemlock, horse chestnut, black locust, oak, tulip tree, black walnut and yew also grow in the park. Near the park's Madison St./Ostrom Ave. entrance is a rare and magnificent weeping beech, planted in the 1880s, which is a continuing source of great pride to park neighbors.



Some of the finest views of Syracuse can be found from atop the park's resident drumlin, which is also a great place for walking a dog, tossing a frisbee, sunbathing, reading or just sitting quietly to watch the sun set.



Historic view of the Amphitheater in Thornden Park, Syracuse, New York.

Thornden Park is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places as an historic designed landscape. A walk along the curving roads and brick paths of Thornden will reveal hints of its varied history as a farm, estate, and park, purchased by the city in 1921 to preserve a patch of green space in the midst of a rapidly growing neighborhood. (For more information, see [A Brief History](#).) Significant structures built in the park between 1923 and 1933 include a [swimming pool and bathhouse](#), [amphitheater](#),

carriage house, [standpipe](#) (water tower atop the drumlin) and stone [field house](#).

Another big part of the park's draw is its variety of recreational facilities. In addition to the very popular swimming pool, the park features several tennis courts and a well-utilized football / soccer / lacrosse field. During summer, its two full-court basketball courts are packed with players of all ethnic backgrounds and skill levels. In winter, although it is officially discouraged, the sledding down the drumlin hill is superb.

Thornden's Gardens

Thornden Park features a variety of gardens which have been planted, maintained, or otherwise sponsored by local organizations or individuals. The gardens' symmetrical layouts follow the Beaux Arts style popular in America in the early decades of the twentieth century. In Thornden Park, these formal gardens contrast with the planned informality of the existing landscape.

Dr. Edmund M. Mills Memorial Rose Garden (1923)



The Dr. Edmund Mills Rose Garden was added to Thornden Park in 1923 by the Syracuse Rose Society, which still maintains it. (The Society can be reached by e-mail at: srsroses@twcny.rr.com. Their web site is: <http://www.syracuserosesociety.org>.) The group was forced to consolidate rose gardens that it tended in Kirk Park and on the Syracuse University campus into a new location, and Thornden Park was chosen as the site of the new garden. The rose garden was dedicated on July 2, 1924 as the Dr. Edmund M. Mills Memorial Rose Garden, in honor of the Rose Society's founder and president. It is one of the oldest municipal rose gardens in the country.

The Mills Rose Garden annually displays the finest new rose varieties developed both here and abroad which will be introduced to the public by the All-American Rose Selections (A.A.R.S. - <http://www.rose.org/>) the following year. The Mills Rose Garden is one of ten A.A.R.S.-accredited public rose gardens in New York. There are currently 3400 roses in the garden, including a bed specifically dedicated to fragrance roses.

Perennial Garden and Lily Pond (1930)



A 1950's view of the Lily Pond in Thornden Park, Syracuse, New York.

In 1930, a formal perennial garden was established just north of the rose garden. This garden was arranged in concentric rings with brick pathways radiating from a central man-made waterfall. The waterfall flowed through a rock garden into a lily pond. At its peak, nearly 35,000 perennial plants of 200 varieties were maintained there.

Today, the brick pathways remain, but perennial plantings are limited to the area surrounding the lily pond.

In 1987, following years of neglect, the Thornden Park Association began clearing out and re-planting the perennial garden beds around the lily pond. Because restoration of the deteriorated lily pond was beyond the means of the volunteer organization, City of Syracuse masons began restoration of the pond in 1990, and completed work in 1993.

Pinetum (1931)

The Thornden pinetum was established in 1931 along the western edge of the park, on the hill overlooking Ostrom Ave. It was planted with a wide variety of evergreen trees selected by the College of Forestry faculty. Many native conifers were transplanted from nearby Labrador Pond, while non-indigenous trees were planted as well.

In 1993, the group known as the Boys from Syracuse adopted the pinetum as a memorial garden to those who have died from AIDS. In June, 2000, New York State awarded the City of Syracuse a \$7500 grant to help replace trees in the pinetum that were damaged or destroyed by the 1998 Labor Day storm.

Herb Garden (1938)

During 1938 and 1939, an herb garden was created next to the pinetum, at the urging of the Home Garden Club of Syracuse. The original 30' x 50' garden, designed by city forester Paul Wells, was enclosed by a low hedge with geometric planting beds and grass paths. The city prepared the site in the Fall of 1938, then the Home Garden Club planted 87 varieties of herbs the following spring.

Azalea Walk

At one time, ornamental flowers were also planted elsewhere in Thornden Park. A wooded ravine was partially cleared to make way for a pedestrian path and plantings of rhododendrons. This "Azalea Walk," as it was then called (the sunken brick pathway, which runs from the intersection of Madison and South Beech Streets to the park drive looping past the pool, is now called the Winter Walk), had an informal woodland character, in contrast to the formality of the rose and perennial gardens. A lilac collection, planted in informal massings, adorned the side slope on the eastern boundary of the park.

Why Is It Called "Thornden"?

Thornden most likely took its name from the hawthorn, a common native tree both in Britain and America, a species that was and still is present on the park property. Major Alexander H. Davis, owner of the estate from 1875 to 1910, was proud of his English heritage and named the estate Thornden in the British tradition of bestowing distinct sites with descriptive place-names. In America, houses are typically known by street numbers or by the name of a present or former owner. However, private properties in Britain have historically been known by specific place-names. Even in urban areas, houses are often named rather than numbered. Typically a name remains a permanent feature of the property, outlasting changes in ownership and even extreme physical alterations.

Thornden Park Association (1983)

In the 1980s, Thornden Park began to be viewed as a cultural resource. The Thornden Park Association (TPA) began in September 1983 when a group of park neighbors met at City Hall

with various officials to share concerns about the park and brainstorm possible solutions to such problems as the park's negative image, traffic safety and lack of programming.

The group's mission is to "advocate for, lobby and improve the image, facilities, landscape and use of Thornden Park on behalf of the countless people who use and appreciate this park as well as to recognize and protect its historical integrity."

The Thornden Park Association currently holds an annual neighborhood garden tour, as well as a mid-winter chili festival, to raise money for park projects. A one-hour slide show depicting Thornden Park's history from the days of the Davis estate through its present revitalization is available for presentation to local community groups and organizations. The program shows the building of the amphitheater, pool and water tower, and the development of the world-renowned Mills Rose Garden. To schedule a showing, contact Margi Nasemann at 315-445-0061.

For more information about becoming a member of the Thornden Park Association, to receive its newsletter, or to volunteer to help with one of its many activities, contact President Miranda Hine by e-mail at mjhine@syr.edu. The Thornden Park Association website is: <http://www.thorndenpark.org>. In addition to listing the group's current activities, the site contains an interactive map showing the exact location of the park.

The "Carriage House"

Since 1988, the Thornden Park Association has been trying to get the park's "carriage house" restored into a multi-purpose, year-round educational center for community and park programs. This building, located across the park drive from the picnic area, is thought to be part of the original greenhouse complex of the Davis estate.

According to the Winter 1999 edition of the Thornden Park Association newsletter, restoration would turn the carriage house into a "central facility for educational programming aimed primarily at Syracuse's youth and residents. Lectures, workshops, exhibits and walking tours will focus on the history of the park and the surrounding residential neighborhood, and explore the park's culture and rich natural environment."

Thornden Park Is A Protected Historic Site

Thornden Park's significance as an historic landscape was recognized in 1989 when it was designated a local protected site by the City of Syracuse. In 1994, the park was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places as an historic designed landscape.

Parking

Probably the best place in Thornden to park is in the main lot next to the poolhouse. You can enter this lot from S. Beech St. or Greenwood Pl. Some parking is allowed near the Mills Memorial Rose Garden right off Ostrom Ave. This is a good place to park if you want to stop and marvel at the roses or check out the park's gardens. Parking is allowed along the park road that runs between the athletic field and the perennial garden. Take care when parking here in the

evening, as break-ins have been known to occur. Parking is also not discouraged on the loop around the standpipe (water tower) which sits atop the drumlin. Remember, however, that the park officially closes at 9 p.m.