

HOUSATONIC RIVER WALK DOWNSTREAM



F | Native and Invasive Plants

River Walk meanders through urban tended gardens and the wild natural world. This can be seen along the downstream section where a split-rail fence divides the trail and riverbank. The areas on either side are managed very differently. On the river side where steep banks meet the water's edge, volunteers weed invasive exotics only. On the path side, they cultivate a public garden of diverse native plants.

In the early stages of River Walk, many plants found here were not indigenous. They have been identified by state officials as invasive exotics, plants that grow so prolifically, they degrade the biodiversity of natural habitats. Our workers remove invasive exotic species without the use of chemicals and replace them with indigenous Berkshire County plants.

BIODIVERSITY

Creating a diverse native plant community is the keystone of our reclamation work. Layered plantings contribute to surface water quality by shading and cooling the river and by stabilizing the bank, preventing erosion and river siltation. Native plants cleanse and take up pollutants and, by replacing non-native invasive plants, increase biodiversity and expand wildlife habitat and food sources. Where we have established successful native plantings, we harvest seeds to expand these areas. Two hundred native species we have planted are identified on the River Walk website.



G | Education

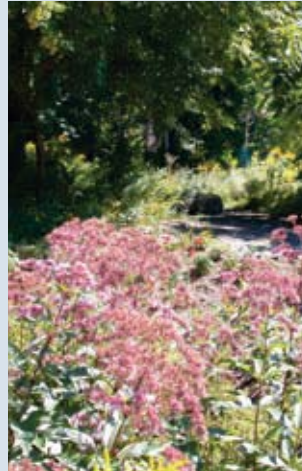
River Walk is an outdoor classroom for students from kindergarten through graduate school. We offer tours and lectures about the restoration of riverine environments and town history. Interns from regional colleges assist with all aspects of development and maintenance. While earning credit in their field of study, they learn about the reclamation of riverine ecosystems and the practicalities of maintaining a public space.

From 2006-2009, River Walk was the site of a study about the effects of aerobically brewed compost tea on plant growth of native species in constructed soils. The results helped us prioritize our planting strategies, focusing on species that we found to self-propagate rapidly. This rapid growth bolstered our resolve to maintain an herbicide-free environment. They are posted on the River Walk website.

COMPOST TEA

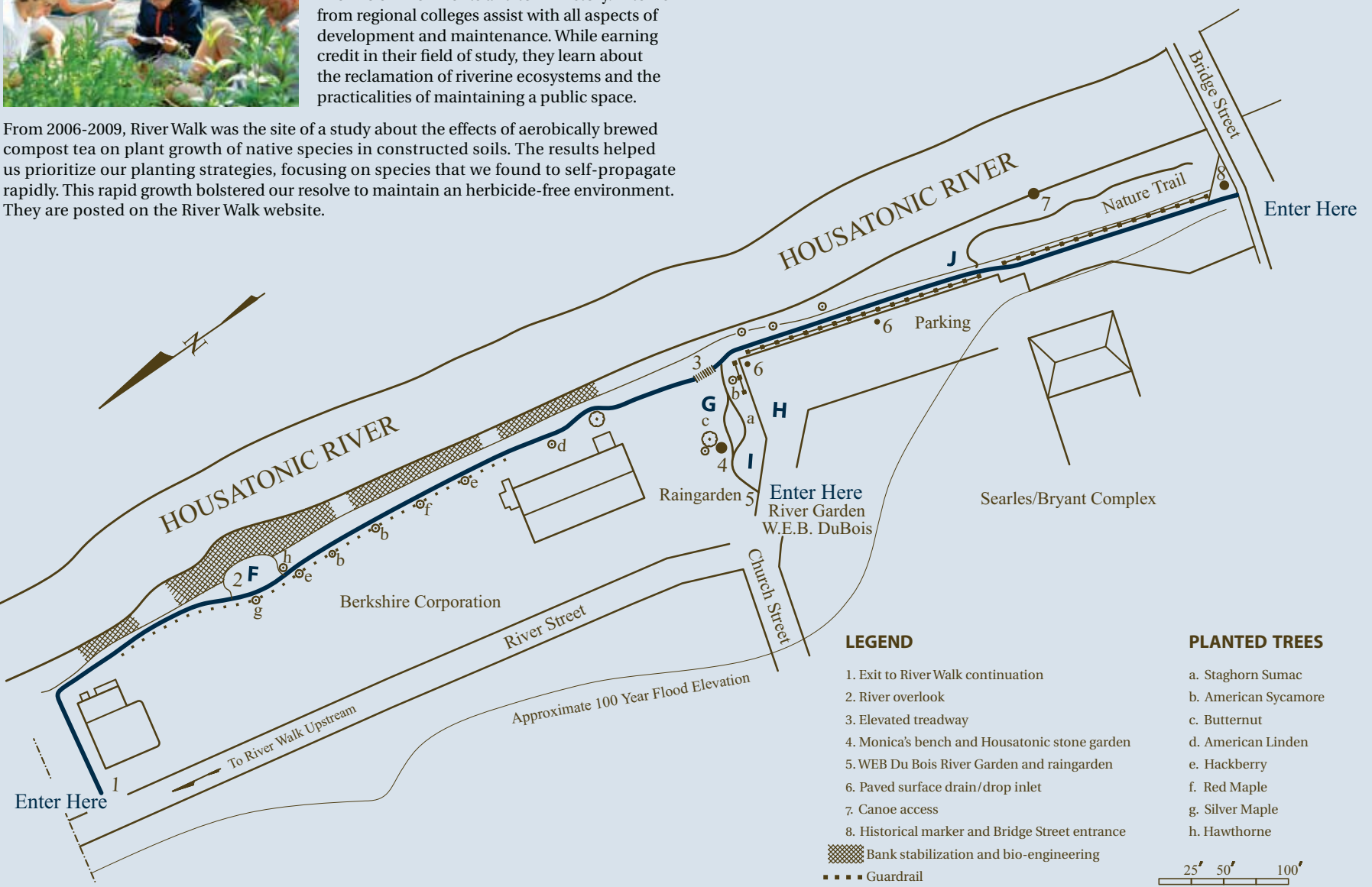
Most native plants in North American forests have a complex symbiotic relationship with bacteria and fungi that inhabit the soils of healthy forests. This relationship is disabled at River Walk where most of the "soil" is really a compilation of debris, fill and just plain junk. Aerobically brewed compost tea was used on various areas of the River Walk to develop complex symbiotic relationships present in healthy forest soils. The tea is a coldwater extract of compost. It is essentially a microorganism farm where bacteria and fungi are grown before dispersing onto a crop or soil. The non-toxic tea was regularly tested to assess the quality and quantity of its microorganisms, then applied to the soil to assist plant growth.

I | Rain Garden



The area surrounding River Walk was once a floodplain, capturing nutrient rich sediment carried by the river. It had many layers of vegetation to hold rain and slow its release onto the ground. The permeable soils of a floodplain prevent flooding by absorbing and holding water before slowly releasing it to the water table. A pristine floodplain is the ideal landscape for keeping water fresh and clean. Today, instead of a rich environment of diverse plants, there is turf grass and hard pavement, which cannot filter runoff nor hold floodwater from storms.

We have created a rain garden to help restore the river's flood plain. The rain garden is an essential feature of the Du Bois River Garden, situated between the street and the river. It is a catch basin where runoff velocity is slowed. Indigenous wetland plants filter and cleanse the water, which soaks slowly into the soil. Any excess water flows into an overflow drain where suspended sediments are trapped. The rain garden produces seeds used to vegetate other areas along the River Walk.



Rescue the Housatonic and restore its ancient beauty; making it the center of a town, of a valley, and perhaps a new measure of civilized life.

-W.E.B. Du Bois, 1930



H | W. E. B. Du Bois River Garden

The Housatonic River plays a special role in our local and national history. This park entrance to River Walk is located at the corner of River and Church Streets, a mere two hundred feet from where the great civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois was born. Du Bois wrote that he was "born by a golden river" and advocated that we "rescue the Housatonic River and create the park it might have been."

On September 28, 2002 the W. E. B. Du Bois River Garden park was dedicated in recognition of his lifelong passion for environmental justice and rivers everywhere. The W.E.B. Du Bois River Garden is a site on the Upper Housatonic Valley African American Heritage Trail.

J | The Housatonic River

The Housatonic River flows 150 miles from four sources in western Massachusetts, passing through the Berkshires and western Connecticut before it empties into Long Island Sound. The watershed, or land area, that drains into the river encompasses 1,948 square miles and includes hundreds of rivers and streams.

From River Walk's canoe launch near Bridge Street, the Housatonic River meanders through oxbows and flats to another canoe access off Brookside Road in Great Barrington, near Eisner Camp.

A BIT OF HISTORY

An important episode of King Philip's War, which happened at a nearby Mahican ford, is commemorated by the stone marker at Bridge Street. In 1676, Major John Talcott overtook and killed a fleeing band of Narragansett Indians who fought the encroachment of European settlers on their traditional lands.