

# [Garden]



The water cascades at Columbus Park, designed by legendary landscape architect Jens Jensen. By embracing the Midwest's natural resources, he made people aware of the region's inherent beauty. ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTO

# Prairie inspiration

Jens Jensen opened Chicago's eyes to the beauty and grandeur of Midwestern landscape

By Barbara Mahany | TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Julia Bachrach is loping along the tallgrass bank that traces the prairie river that dares to meander lazily through Humboldt Park, on Chicago's hardly bucolic West Side.

On this hot autumn day, you can hear the wind playing through the cottonwoods and rustling grasses, but mostly what you hear is Bachrach, the Chicago Park District's resident historian, unspooling the legacy of a tall, red-headed Dane with the bushy mustache who long ago imagined the beauty he could bring to the city's teeming masses.

Back when Chicago was strutting its stuff as the hog butcher, toolmaker, stacker of wheat in the middle of America, a landscape architect by the name of Jens Jensen worked his way up through the West Side parks, from bottom-of-the-ladder laborer to superintendent and chief visionary. Along the way, Jensen, who would become known as the dean of the Prairie style of landscape architecture, discovered the particular majesty of the Midwest: the limestone outcroppings left behind by ice-age gla-

ciers, the native plants, the vast prairie that opens up to big, broad sky.

At the turn of the last century, Jensen rode the streetcar to the end of the line, out to where the wildflowers bloomed, and dug up that native beauty by the shovelful, rerooting it in city parks and green spaces that were, for the people of jampacked Chicago, touchstones and saving graces.

"It wasn't like he woke up one morning and said, 'I have a new idea.' It was an evolution," says Bachrach, who has been



2010 marks the 150th anniversary of Jens Jensen's birth. CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT PHOTO

celebrating the sesquicentennial of Jensen's birth this year with walking history tours of Humboldt, Columbus and Garfield parks, where Jensen's thumbprint can be found in council rings (seating circles made of stone) and prairie rivers, in limestone waterfalls and native grasses.

Striding across a bridge over the river that Jensen sketched and carved out of flatland, looking south to where wild phlox and black-eyed Susans tangle, Bachrach says, "This park helps you to understand, it was like a living laboratory for his evolving theory."

Before Jensen, she says, "a lot of people didn't think these landscapes had value. It took a European to come and say, 'Look at this.' He had a sense of how important they were to the city. He felt that being close to nature was essential to the human spirit.

"And he was very charismatic; he had this amazing power to get folks energized, and eventually had this amazing group of clients. He invited them to lunch," stirred passions, and in 1913 coalesced under the name Friends of Our Native Landscape. Soon was born the conservation move-

ment of the Midwest, with an unswerving determination to, first off, save the Indiana Dunes, which Jensen considered "one of the most precious and endangered landscapes in America."

Standing beside rushing waters as they splash against stacked-up limestone, in the light-dappled woods of Columbus Park, not too far from where graffiti mars the pocked brick walls of a worn-down city, you can't help but whisper thanks that Jensen saved, too, a precious swath of nature in the urban jungle.

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## To learn more

Find out more about Jens Jensen's legacy at [jensjensen.org](http://jensjensen.org); the site includes links to many resources, including a downloadable walking tour of Humboldt Park with Chicago Park District historian Julia Bachrach.

## Embracing Jensen close to home

Not only to pay homage to the legacy of Jens Jensen, Chicago's own green-space savior, but also because it's good for the soul, we asked Julie Siegel, an Evanston-based landscape designer steeped in the Jensen aesthetic, to share a few ways we might bring a little Jensen to our own backyards. Here's what she suggests:

**Think ahead, way ahead:** Plant your garden with an eye to the next generation. "You may not be alive to see that oak tree get to be as tall as the house," she says, but plant the acorns anyway. Maybe make a space for children, "something that engages them so they get connected at an early age." Grow food. Grow seed-bearing plants and pass the seeds along to others.

**Go native:** Incorporate native plants and regional materials wisely. For reference, check out Douglas W. Tallamy's essential "Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants (Updated and Expanded)" (Timber Press, \$17.95). Ironic, says Siegel, that Jensen had to come from another country to appreciate Midwestern limestone. Ditch plans for granite and bluestone, neither of which is dug from these parts.

**Bring on the light:** Make the changing seasonal impact of light a priority in your design. "In Jensen's design, he often had a large meadow surrounded by forest. He often had a place to observe the summer or winter solstice. Light is a big defining element in design; most people only see color." Place ornamental grasses on an east-west axis so light comes through in morning or evening. Be conscious of trees before they leaf out, consider how that will affect the plant palette. Notice the capriciousness of light, how it illuminates for "short, mysterious periods."

**Get dirty:** Design knowing you will maintain at least part of your garden. Jensen strongly felt there was a civilizing result from connecting with your garden and doing the maintenance. "Just take a little patch of it, or even one pot. If you have to stand there and water it, you have to pay attention. How about a phone-free zone?" There is a healthy, spiritual aspect to tending to a plot of earth.

**Don't go it alone:** Include a communal gathering place. "This creates a breathing space and strengthens the community," says Siegel. When Jensen created the West Side parks, he knew that most people had no green space of their own. There are many ways to make your garden a place that draws in others: If you don't have kids of your own, plan a treasure hunt around your garden; stick a bench on the street; help construct a dog garden. "Many of us like to have a sanctuary," says Siegel, "but Jensen encourages us to connect at different levels."

— B.M.



Jensen integrated his ideas for park programs with Prairie style design, as in the council ring at Columbus Park, which was used for storytelling (c. 1920). ABOVE, FRANK WAUGH COLLECTION, DEPARTMENT OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURES AND REGIONAL PLANNING, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST. RIGHT, ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTO



Visitors, left, enjoy the view at the Humboldt Park Prairie River. Jensen's Flower Hall pavilion, right, ushers visitors into the gardens of Douglas Park. CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT SPECIAL COLLECTIONS PHOTOS