

**"How many New York dads
can say that they go to work
every day in a forest?"**





Greening of New York

by Bill Glovin

Clemson alumnus Larry Shepps knows the location of the hundreds of trees his firm has planted in New York City, but none are more important to him than the 14 locust and pear trees that dot a spacious plaza at 59 Maiden Lane. The plaza, which sits between a skyscraper and the Federal Reserve Building, was built on the site of Thomas Jefferson's home when the statesman was secretary of state in 1790 and New York was the nation's capital.

“Look around,”

says Shepps, pointing to a street that was designed centuries ago for carriages but now squeezes cars and trucks through Manhattan's bustling financial district. “This is one of the few spaces where people can sit and take a break from the hustle and bustle of Wall Street. The trees and other landscape touches — dancing fountains, park benches, red brick — helped the landlord turn a struggling property into a fully leased building and won him a business district improvement award.”

Shepps, who holds a 1979 master's degree in horticulture, is the founder and principal of Plantus Horticultural Contracting. He helps turn drab gray city

streets to green and, at the same time, improve the quality of life for residents and commuters.

A native New Yorker, Shepps came South in the early 1970s to study environmental health at the University of Georgia, where he earned a bachelor's degree. But a chance meeting in Louisiana brought him to Clemson for graduate work.

“It's funny how an encounter with a stranger can change your life in unimagined ways,” he says, recalling his meeting Clemson student Yorke Hanna at Mardi Gras in his senior year. Hanna became a friend who invited Shepps to visit campus.

An avid biker, Shepps fell in love with the Piedmont region. “I thought I might open a plant store and take some graduate-level courses,” he recalls. “So I introduced myself to the head of the horticulture department, T.L. Senn, who offered me a full scholarship to run a solar greenhouse research project. I forgot about the plant store and began working toward a master's degree in horticulture.”

After receiving his degree, Shepps planned to return to his native Long Island and look for a teaching job. “I had a lot of success growing sprouts at Clemson, and they were becoming increasingly popular, so I decided to forget about teaching for the time being and start an alfalfa sprout business,” he says.

From a hydroponics growth chamber that he constructed in the basement of a New York tenement, Shepps sold about 5,000 pounds of sprouts a week to wholesalers. But he ran into problems when customers wouldn't pay for sprouts that they claimed didn't stay fresh.

A friend helped Shepps find a freelance job landscaping a garden apartment complex in Bensonhurst, Queens. He recalls making \$5,000, but more importantly, collecting the fee was a breeze. He started landscaping part time and, a few months

later, was hired as an independent landscaper by a large horticulture contracting firm.

A colleague at the firm tipped him that one of their big clients was opening up bids for a new project. "The client realized that he could cut costs by hiring me as the project manager," says Shepps. "That's how I was able to launch my own firm in 1989."

Plantus concentrates on servicing a handful of corporate clients, as well as luxurious homes in the Hamptons on Long Island and in Westchester County, where Shepps and his family live. Among them are the Sheraton hotels; Vornado, a realty trust company that manages Madison Square Garden, One Penn Plaza and United Nations Plaza; and the Wildlife Conservation Society, which operates the Bronx Zoo.

"We're a full-service boutique, which means interior and exterior plantings, water features, and designing custom-made, seasonal items like a 3,000-piece ornament mountain for Christmas," says Shepps, who has traveled to quarries in remote parts of Italy and China to find stone carvings. "An expanding part of the business is selling glacial stone and these carvings, some of which cannot be found anywhere in the United States."

Last year Plantus received permission to close down Seventh Avenue in front of Penn Station to install more than 40 trees, planters, lights and other materials in a large plaza. "Before we could plant the trees, we needed 23 tractor-trailer loads of soil and 10 more loads of gravel," says Shepps. "The plaza is around the corner from a detoxification clinic, so my crew had to tiptoe around the methadone users. That's also part of the urban landscape."

A good chunk of this past year was spent working 12-hour days to transform a once barren lot at the Bronx Zoo into an Adirondacks forest setting for a new 12-acre Lakeside Visitor

Center. The center contains the zoo's main restaurant, a gift shop and several outdoor dining pavilions. "The pressure was on," says Shepps, "since first impressions are vital and all visitors are ushered through the center. It attracted considerable media attention and will be a major factor in bringing in new revenue."

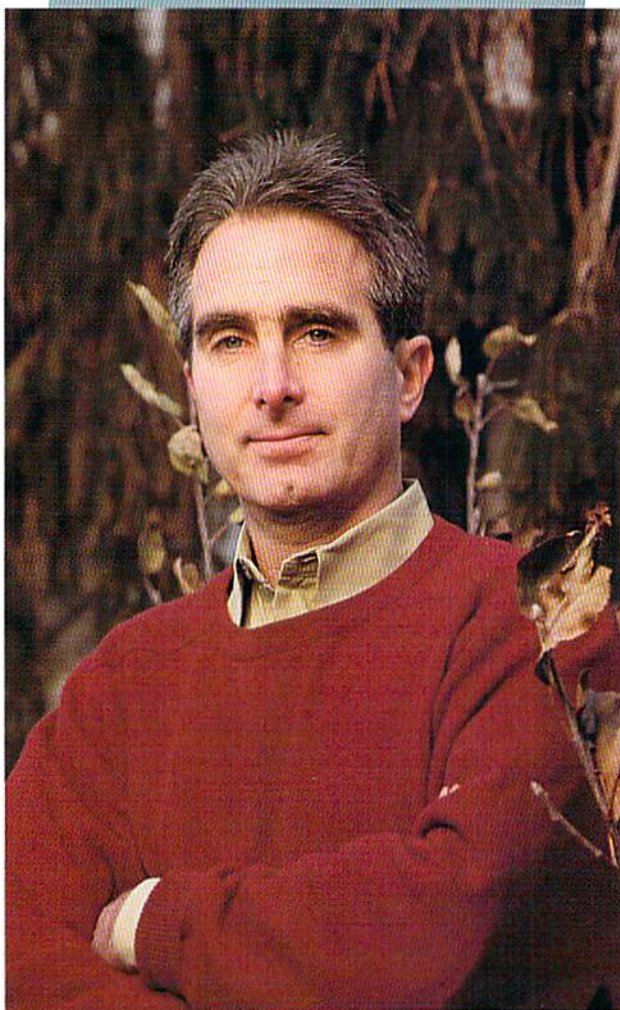
Shepps' crew was already quite familiar with the zoo, having worked on and off for six years helping to create the newly opened Congo Gorilla Forest, one of the most innovative zoo exhibits ever built. "Most visitors consider the gorillas, mandrills and other animals to be the main attraction, but they're more like window dressing," says Shepps. The guts of the forest are its more than 15,000 plants of nearly 400 species, many of which have never before been grown in the New York area.

"Sometimes we used cranes to drop in trees that were 50 feet high, but other times the space was too tight, and we needed 15 men to manually lift a tree and move it into position," explains Shepps. "Many of the trees were extremely thorny so that the gorillas wouldn't tear them and each other apart.

But their thorns made it harder for us to move and plant them, too."

Thorns aside, Shepps thoroughly enjoyed the challenge.

"I wish all my projects were this fun to work on," he says. "When the Congo was under construction, I used to say to my little girls: 'How many New York dads can say that they go to work every day in a forest?'" 🌍



Larry Shepps M '79

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