

# Did you know: The Malden Public library creatively overcame 'hiccups' to complete the 2023 renovation of the Olmsted Garden

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April 9, 2026



Local businessman and philanthropist Elisha Converse established the Malden Public Library (MPL) to benefit the community, and he set up a generous trust to maintain it. He hired one of America's greatest architects, H.H. Richardson, to design the Converse Memorial Building, which houses the Library, and Frederick Law Olmsted, an esteemed landscape architect, to design the Library's garden. Olmsted famously designed Malden's Fellsmere Park, Boston's Emerald Necklace and New York City's Central Park.

In 1884, Olmsted designed the beautiful, serene MPL garden to enhance the architectural beauty of Richardson's Romanesque building. He used a short wall to create separation between the green entrance lawn and the open court. A stunning wrought iron gate was added in 1911.

More than a century later, in 2023, the space was updated and renovated. Under the guidance of the Library's Trustees, landscape architects used Olmsted's original plans to guide their efforts, which included adding an irrigation system, rain sensor, new storm drains and plants. The project was funded exclusively by private donors, including John Giso and John Preotle, who not only generously contributed money, but donated significant time and skill to this effort, as well. Garden maintenance is funded by the trust and ongoing donations.

"We vowed to stay as true to Olmsted's original design as possible, working closely with his original plans for the space," explained MPL Board of Trustees Treasurer Frank M. Molis. "However, there were a few hiccups. For instance, we couldn't use every plant that Olmsted originally used because some are invasive. We worked closely with the landscape company to determine which plants would be comparable, yet non-invasive. It was a very involved, thoughtful project from start to finish. People generously donated – and continue to donate – money specifically for the garden, enabling us to have a gorgeous outdoor space, just as Elisha Converse envisioned many years ago."

"One of the challenges of reconstructing the Garden was its urban location next to the Library, bordered by antique walls and a patio accessible from the street by steps. Therefore, the construction equipment plantings, including sod, were dropped on the site by crane, which was staged in the adjoining church parking lot. The existing plantings and soil were removed in the same way," explained Preotle.

"My favorite garden story is that the Library building needed be completed before the garden could be installed. However, the plants arrived too early, before the building was finished. There was so much uncertainty about what to do with the plants in the meantime.

Elisha wound up keeping all the plants himself, under the care of his own gardener, until they were ready to break ground on the garden. That's the kind of deep commitment he had to this project," explained MPL Director Dora St. Martin.

This spring MPL is working with professional landscapers to "wake up" the garden after the cold, snowy winter. The Malden community is always invited to visit the Library's gorgeous garden to enjoy a good book, connect with neighbors and attend special events, including an upcoming wine tasting in May. View upcoming events on the Library's website, <https://maldenpubliclibrary.org>.

The Library Board of Trustees is comprised of nine Malden resident volunteers who oversee the nonprofit corporation and the trust fund established by Elisha and Mary Diana Converse in 1885. This trust – along with generous donations – funds the building's maintenance, renovations, art, books and garden.