Philadelphia is a city of fascinating history, incredible diversity, and phenomenal public horticulture. The urban parks system is one of the oldest and largest in the country, encompassing more than 10,000 city acres and comprising such gems as the country’s oldest botanical garden, first zoo, and largest landscaped urban park. You could live here for decades without experiencing the whole of what Philadelphia has to offer; so what if you only have a few days, or just one? This itinerary aims to offer a full day of activities centered around the lush & historic neighborhoods of West Philadelphia, easily walkable or transit accessible from Center City, local universities, and the suburbs. It should also serve as a jumping-off point for greater exploration of the City of Brotherly Love.

Stop No. 1
The Woodlands
4000 Woodland Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Open year round from dawn to dusk. Visit woodlandsphila.org for more information.

➔ Enter the Woodlands gates to find tranquility and beauty unlike any other within the city. The Woodlands’ 54-acre undulating landscape is at once a one-of-a-kind 18th-century English pleasure garden, 19th-century rural cemetery, and a modern green oasis for its neighbors in bustling University City and West Philadelphia. Once the 600 acre estate of William Hamilton, today The Woodlands features the historic Hamilton Mansion and Stable, more than 150 Grave Gardens, and 700+ trees including a number of State Champions. Don’t miss the State Champion Caucasian Zelkova (*Zelkova carpinifolia*) near the mansion. It is an exceptional specimen of an unusual species.

➔ As you wander the meandering roads and brick paths, look for Grave Gardens scattered throughout the grounds. These Victorian Era container gardens, called “cradle graves,” were a popular style of headstone in the 19th Century. Before public parks existed, people would spend time in cemeteries like The Woodlands, picnicking, gardening, visiting loved ones, and enjoying time outdoors among trees. Today, these cradle graves are adopted by volunteers called Grave Gardeners, and are lovingly planted with Victorian Era plants and cared for throughout the year. The Grave Gardener program was featured on CBS Sunday Morning in April 2018, and it is nationally recognized by gardeners and non-gardeners alike.

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➔ There is no café at The Woodlands, but visitors are welcome to pack a lunch and picnic on the grounds. There are no public restrooms onsite but the Trolley Car Station across from the entrance does have a public restroom, as well as food options.

➔ If you’re looking for lunch before the next stop, consider the Trolley Car Station for convenient bites, Clarkville for pizza, Loco Pez for tacos, or a bit farther afield, there’s nothing better than a leisurely Ethiopian lunch at Abyssinia.

Stop No. 2
Bartram’s Garden – America’s First Botanical Garden
5400 Lindbergh Blvd., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Open year round from dawn to dusk. Visit bartramsgarden.org to plan your visit.

➔ Situated in historic Lenape territory on the banks of the Lower Schuylkill River, Bartram’s Garden is a 45-acre botanical garden, National Historic Landmark, and public park. It was established in 1728 by the noted American botanist John Bartram, who spent his life traversing eastern North America documenting and collecting native plants. Many of these he propagated at his Garden and eventually sent to Europe, transforming the landscapes of European gardens. Make sure to begin your visit at the Welcome Center (open 10am-4pm, April-December) to pick up a map of the site.

➔ The original Bartram house sits at the top of the Garden, overseeing the historic kitchen garden to the west and the newly reinstated Anne Bartram Carr Garden to the east. Below the kitchen garden you can find a Franklinia tree, a species found by John Bartram and his son William during their expeditions in Georgia and named after John Bartram’s close friend, Benjamin Franklin. Franklinia were last seen in the wild in the early 1800s and all Franklinia today are descended from those specimens collected and cultivated by the Bartrams here in Philadelphia.

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The Garden is also home to the oldest living ginkgo tree in North America (the other two having been planted at Woodlands and chopped down by a disgruntled gardener in the 1980s, as the story goes), and the country’s oldest living yellowwood tree. In the greater naturalistic garden, you can find a wide variety of native North American plants, including a bog garden and planted pond. A boardwalk path will take you along the Schuylkill River and past a cider press carved into the rock by John Bartram. To the north, follow the meadow path to the Community Boat House (free community boating in warmer months, Saturdays 11am-3pm), and to the south you can visit the orchard, Sankofa Community Farm, and 56th Street Pier and Bandstand.

Restrooms are available at the Bartram House and by the Welcome Center during the April-Dec visitation season. Snacks are available at the Welcome Center.

Stop No. 3
Mount Moriah Cemetery – an Urban Wilderness
6201 Kingsessing Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Open year round from dawn to dusk. Visit bartramsgarden.org to plan your visit.

Mount Moriah Cemetery is a hidden gem in Southwest Philadelphia with a complex history, and makes for a fascinating foil to the Woodlands. Like the Woodlands, Mount Moriah was designed as a “rural cemetery,” a sprawling and pastoral landscape that could be enjoyed by living citizenry as well as serve as a beautiful resting place for the dead. Throughout the years, almost 80,000 people were buried here, including veterans of wars dating back to the Revolution. Rates for burial plots and communal burial options ensured a steady stream of business for more than a century, but today the cemetery lies crumbling, overgrown, and largely neglected.

So, what happened? In 2004, the last known member of the Mount Moriah Cemetery Association, which oversaw operations and maintenance of the cemetery, passed away. With no clear owner or board members remaining, operations of the cemetery ceased and the grounds became overgrown. Today there is still no clear recourse for dealing with the historic site, though it has been cared for in a limited capacity by the Friends of Mount Moriah Cemetery since 2011 and continues to see many curious visitors pass by its ornate Romanesque gates today.
Mount Moriah is worth a visit as a reminder of how humans aim to shape the world, and how quickly nature is able to revert the land when such human efforts cease. Some areas of Mount Moriah (such as the burial areas for veterans and the Masons Circle) are still maintained more or less as any other cemetery would be; some areas are so overgrown such as to be entirely impassable. But much of Mount Moriah occupies a sort of twilight between human influence and a natural state. In these areas, wildlife has returned in an abundance one might find surprising within Philadelphia, but then it’s easy to forget you’re in Philadelphia at Mount Moriah. Fox, deer, songbirds and waterfowl, hawks, and other creatures have all made the grounds their home, enough to spur a proposal to convert the site into a nature sanctuary. This is a haunting and reflective place, but one also filled with vibrant life; it’s well worth the journey from the beaten path.

No amenities here. Check the Friends of Mount Moriah Cemetery website for maps.

Additional recommendations for what to visit nearby

- Stop in at Greensgrow West to check out the West Philadelphia outpost of an urban farm, which was founded in Philadelphia’s Kensington neighborhood in 1990s. Expect to find a wide variety of plants and garden paraphernalia for sale; you might even find some locally-grown produce for purchase as well. Check greensgrow.org for seasonal hours and to learn more.

- Walk a few blocks east along Baltimore Avenue to reach Dock Street (701 S. 50th St). This is some of the best pizza around (they recommend the Fig Jam), made in an old converted fire station that also houses Dock Street’s brewery (too many good beers to choose; try a flight).

- If you have children, consider a visit to the Philadelphia Zoo www.philadelphiazoo.org

- If you have a lot of time to kill on a summer day, explore Fairmount Park. This sprawling urban park dates back to the early 1800s and comprises thousands of acres, but there is a remarkable density of exciting things to do and see in the western part of the park. Visit the Horticultural Center, a tropical greenhouse once home to the largest glass conservatory of its time; Shofuso, a historical Japanese teahouse and traditional garden; the Belmont Plateau, home of the best view of the city from within the city; and end with a dip in Kelly Pool, a free public pool surrounded by grass and trees, in the shadow of the Please Touch Museum. Check Philadelphia’s municipal website for pool hours.

- West Philadelphia is full of good food, most located along or within a few blocks of Baltimore Avenue. Favorites include: Abyssinia, Dahlak, or Gojjo for Ethiopian (everyone has their favorite); Aksum for mediterranean; Fu Wah for a banh mi; Saad’s for Middle Eastern; Manakeesh for Lebanese flat bread; Ice Cave for shaved ice and popsicles; Little Baby’s for ice cream; Local 44 for elevated pub fare; Vientiane Cafe for Laotian-Thai; Desi Village for Indian; and many more.

Enjoy this self-driving itinerary that will help you discover new places to get outside, enjoy nature and learn about horticulture! The Philadelphia region has a rich tradition of public gardens, arboreta and historic landscapes. There are more than 30 gardens within 30 miles of Philadelphia. The gardens mentioned in this itinerary are just a sampling of the rich diversity in the Philadelphia region where there is so much to discover and explore. Learn more at www.americasgardencapital.org.