On Campus

Farewell, Linden Trees; Hello, Cherry Blossoms

A tree replacement on College Walk lets us branch out, sit down, and plug in.

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New trees and benches grace College Walk. (Paul Hond)

The arborists have spoken, said Don Schlosser, standing on College Walk near the Broadway gates in July. He pointed to the noble littleleaf lindens on the famed pathway. The trees, with their long, straight trunks, forked branches, and heart-

shaped leaves, were more than sixty feet tall and more than seventy years old, and Schlosser, the assistant vice president of operations at Columbia, loved them as much as any on campus. But for safety's sake, he said, they had to come down.

The project began last semester, when workers removed mature lindens from the southwest quadrant of College Walk, on the path outside Pulitzer Hall, and replaced them with new cement benches (modeled after McKim, Mead, and White's originals, three of which remain on Low Plaza), electrical outlets, black lampposts ringed with shrubs, and a row of new Japanese sakura, or ornamental flowering cherry trees. Now, under Schlosser's eye, this pattern was being repeated in the other three quadrants — northwest, by Dodge Hall; northeast, by Kent Hall; and southeast, by Hamilton Hall.

Schlosser dated the old College Walk lindens to no later than 1953, the year that 116th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam was closed to automobile traffic. "They were planted almost at street level," said Schlosser. "There was no bed. The root flare" — the point where the trunk meets the root system, and which should be aboveground — "was coming up too high. So they raised the soil bed and covered the root flare with dirt. But those roots, which anchor the tree, need oxygen. So the root flare died, and the trees became like logs stuck in mud. They could just topple over."

The other problem was that College Walk's existing cherry trees — known for their pink blossoms in spring and their festive white lights in winter — were visibly suffering under the lindens. "They're not understory trees," said Schlosser. He pulled up a photo on his phone of the robust and fluffy pink-flowered cherry blossoms on Revson Plaza outside the law school. "That's what they look like when they're not in competition," he said, "and that's what we want the College Walk trees to look like."

Cherry trees have a long history in Morningside Heights. The Big Apple's first cherries arrived from Japan in 1912, a gift to the city from a group called the Committee of Japanese Residents of New York. The trees were planted in Riverside Park and in Claremont Park — now Sakura Park — in front of Riverside Church.

Schlosser envisioned the new College Walk benches filled with students, now enjoying unobstructed views of the historic buildings where the tall lindens had stood. And he wagered that the new cherry trees would hold their own against any in town. "When they mature, they're going to expand out into this bed," he said. "They're going to be magnificent."

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