

Urban Soil Appreciation Initiative



Aesthetics Division

Welcome to the temporary field office of the Urban Soil Appreciation Initiative. This is an artist-run project with a focus on the overlooked and under-appreciated qualities of urban soil. This is the project's first iteration, and it focuses on the aesthetics and structure of soil in the Wissahickon Valley.

David Contosta and Carol Franklin, authors of an extensive four volume book on the Wissahickon, explain the situation of urban soil succinctly:

The functions of soil in the Wissahickon Valley have been disrupted by erosion, compaction, the chemical residues of invasive exotic plants, the rapid churning of leaf litter by earthworms and by nitrogen deposition from acid rain, among many impacts. The United States Department of Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA NRCS...) has classified soils based on a variety of distinguishing characteristics. In this classification system "urban" or "made soils" are lumped together and are not broken down into their components. Since significant parts of the Wissahickon Valley have been classified as urban soils, even the most basic information about the properties of these soils is not available. There are presently no soil studies for the Wissahickon Valley and particularly no studies of the living components.¹

The Urban Soil Appreciation Initiative is not designed to remedy this lack of knowledge through providing scientific data or quantitative analysis. Rather, it seeks to explore the fundamental visual, tactile and structural qualities of our urban soil from a layman's perspective, directing public attention to the mysterious medium that forms the substrate of our urban and suburban habitats.

Out in the park, visitors will be able to visit a number of soil sampling sites located throughout the many microclimates of the Wissahickon, from its suburban borderlands to the rich riparian zones along the river's edge. Soil samples from around the park will be brought to a central location along Forbidden Drive, where they will be sorted, examined and appreciated for their diverse aesthetic and structural components. Rubbings and samples will also be brought back to the field office where they will be displayed for further contemplation.

more info: ellieirons.com/soil

¹ Contosta, David and Carol Franklin. *Metropolitan Paradise: The Struggle for Nature in the City, Philadelphia's Wissahickon Valley 1620-2020*, p 743.