In 2012 Google introduced Street View Trekker—the backpack-mounted version of that same camera system. Google not only loans them out but awards a modest donation for Trekking. As director of Streisgang Gardens, a steep hillside garden, I thought it would be an amazing tool for visitors who either couldn’t normally maneuver the garden, or who were too far away to visit it in person. I later discovered many larger gardens have already done Trekking.

Since the application process for checking out a Street View Trekker is competitive, I feared that Google wouldn’t loan this expensive equipment to a single, small public garden. So I reached out through Streisgang Gardens to a number of other public gardens in the Northwest that also belong to the Garden Conservancy Northwest Network. In the end, the project I proposed to Google included seven gardens. I’ve since learned that it seems likely Google would be willing to let a single garden check out a Street View Trekker.

In early April of this year, six boxes were delivered to me via FedEx. The Street View Trekker is a 45-pound backpack made up of a metal frame with shoulder straps on one side and a computer on the other side. About a foot above your head is a bright green “soccer ball”-like metal frame housing fifteen cameras. The Street View Trekker is very easy to use and is controlled via an app on a special cell phone that comes with the kit. Just press a button on the app, start walking, and let the computer do the work. The cameras automatically take multi-dimensional photos at preset intervals. The cameras take multiple overlapping pictures but have a dead zone around where you’re standing. Neither Wi-Fi nor cell phone coverage is needed because the system only uses GPS to track your location.

Be warned: You need about eight feet of clearance. Low branches and other obstacles can literally force you to your knees; you can’t bend forward or backward and still get usable images. Walking through the gardens before I started recording helped me avoid extra wires and tears on my knees. Google recommends you only Trek between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. because the quality of light is better, and shadows are less likely to interfere.

Many pedestrians were interested in the contraption I was wearing. While it’s easy to have just a single person do the Trekking, I found having someone along to score, help me get the equipment on my back, and answer questions was useful. I was able to complete most of the gardens I visited in under two hours walking at a normal pace, but it did take some planning.

After the equipment is returned, Google stitches the images together and then turns faces and license plates for privacy reasons. At last the new Street View imagery is added to the system for everyone to explore. Trekking was an extremely fun and rewarding experience for me, and I hope more public gardens will apply to check out a Street View Trekker and include their inner geek-dom. While the gardens I Trekked haven’t been added to Street View yet, there are other gardens already in the system. You can also check out https://www.google.com/maps/about/treks to see examples of some of the most incredible spaces in the world that have been Trekked.

Ben Streisgang has been the director of Streisgang Gardens since 2013. He grew up on the site and spent over forty years working in the garden. He’s always interested in bringing technology into this small public garden to help visitors connect with the space. His education includes horticultural and landscape architecture degrees. He may be reached at benzstreisganggardens.com.