



WING HAVEN GARDENS & BIRD SANCTUARY

Charlotte, North Carolina

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Located in the heart of Charlotte's historic district, along a comfortable residential street, is an urban wilderness called Wing Haven. The three-acre landscape is a sanctuary for birds, wildlife, and people. It may be historic, but is not a bit dingy or dusty. Rather it is a vibrant, energetic landscape bursting with sound, smells, and bird and wildlife sightings. The skeleton or bones of the space is mature, and sports massive trees, some soaring high, while others are gnarled and bending over.

Elizabeth and Edwin Clarkson moved to this location in 1927. Elizabeth, a new bride, had designed the house and Edwin, a very smart new husband, had the house built according to her plans. The house construction was a success, only it was sitting on a bare field of clay when they drove up. They went to work and began to create a landscape that would support their beliefs. They were organic before organic was chic and they were friends to wildlife long before that concept became a national organization.

Today, the garden and house is owned by the Wing Haven Foundation, a non-profit organization entrusted with the preservation and perpetuation of the Clarkson's dream. Just as when the Clarkson's were alive, it remains an education site for sustainable landscape practices and is still a place where wildlife, birds, and people can harmoniously co-exist. Five full time people run the enterprise, three in the garden and two in administration. There are seven seasonal part-timers and 254 volunteers who contribute to the well-being of Wing Haven. Primary funding sources include a capital funds drive endowment and annual membership dues. Nursery plant sales, education

programs, garden tours, building rentals, and grants complete the diversified funding scheme. The Clarkson's were not wealthy financiers who left funds in perpetuity for the operation and maintenance of their grounds and home. Rather, they poured all their resources, sweat equity and money, into the land and its feathered and furred occupants while they were alive. The garden grew over time, and many components are handmade or collected. Dia Steiger, Executive Director explains, "Hard work made this garden, not writing a check." There's even a national champion *Vitex* tree on site that Elizabeth Clarkson rooted from a cutting taken from her parent's home in Texas.

One revenue generator that contributes 15% to present day operations are the annual plant sales held in spring and fall. Plants are purchased from nurseries in South Carolina, Georgia, and North Carolina and then held in Wing Haven's plant nursery in preparation for the big event. Best selling plants are whatever is in spectacular bloom in the garden at the time of the sale. In April, *Viburnum macrocephalum* drips its white blooms over a gate people pass by as they enter the nursery sales area and demand for that plant always exceeds supply at the sale. Orange blossomed fragrant tea olive (*Osmanthus fragrans aurantiacus*) is the best selling fall bloomer. The plant sale is a much-anticipated event that offers an extensive selection of antique roses, herbs, perennials, vines, bulbs, trees and shrubs, and natives. For a complete plant list and sale dates visit <http://www.winghavengardens.com/PDF/09PlantList.pdf>. Garden tools and clothes are available

from the gift shop and on-line. The Wing Haven landscape is a series of garden rooms that combine formal with wild elements. Paths are either bricked or natural and wooden arrows clearly point the way. Plants are labeled by numbers and interpretive literature allows for a complete self guided tour. Handcrafted cedar arbors and iron trellises encased in vines create a sense of shelter before opening onto a vista with a focal point fountain, statue, or bench. The birds fluttering about and the owl in the tree overhead keep the clipped boxwood hedges from feeling imposing.

It is obvious that professional gardeners work here, the 1,600 boxwood plants are healthy and vigorous, not misshapen lumps with brown-leaved bottoms. The gnarly vines, dense underbrush, and mature plantings are quite natural while the clipped parterre creates a delightful sense of order. Water is always within sight or sound with bubbling fountains, a stream, and still bird baths. Twigs and branches remain where they fall so there is cover for wildlife. Shrubs and vines covered with berries provide food for the winged and four footed inhabitants, and platform bird feeders are strategically placed in the middle of paths, directly on the ground, to make feeding easy for birds and other seed eaters. The brilliance of this garden is its high quality design, function (for birds, wildlife, and people), and maintenance. It is a rare find to see all three aspects magnificently demonstrated in a place where history dictates present actions.

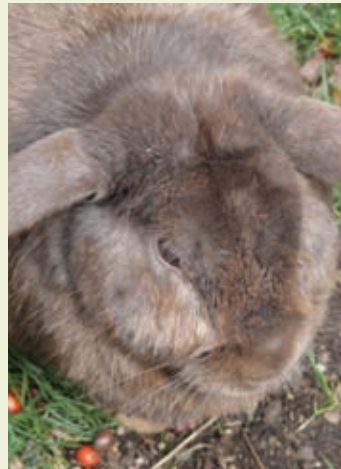
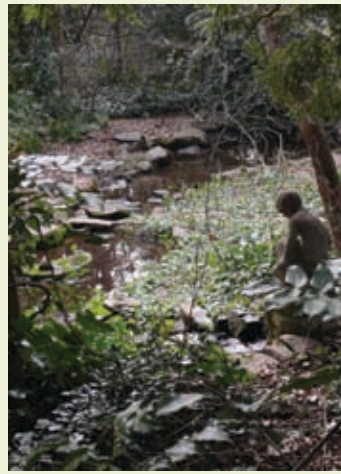
Jeff Drum, Garden Curator, took the job after graduating with a degree in grounds maintenance from Catawba Valley Community College. He has been at Wing

Haven for eight years and he works closely with the two gardeners, Damou Sako and Danny Perez, and the Garden Committee. "Wing Haven is a very special place. The story, the history, it's all special. It's nice to be a part of that" he reports.

Wing Haven is a historical garden whose maintenance relies on oral tradition rather than written documents. Drum explains, "We try to preserve the garden in the style in which they [the Clarkson's] created and maintained it. It is organic, we don't use chemical sprays. It is a garden and a bird sanctuary. I work with a garden committee made up of people who knew the Clarkson's really well. This is a great help and their input and understanding is sought. They have a very clear vision of what Wing Haven meant and what it was intended to be." Whenever the staff are engaged in a new task they instinctively ask themselves, "Now what would Elizabeth do?" If they aren't sure they consult the garden committee, who does know.

Drum and the other staff have the utmost respect for the Clarksons that borders on reverence. One story claims Elizabeth Clarkson figured out DDT was harming birds long before the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Nights when she heard the spray truck entering her neighborhood, Elizabeth would stand in the road and insist the spray be stopped while they drove by her acreage. The Clarkson's rescued birds, nursed birds, and even opened the windows in the house to let birds fly in and out of their lovely home. Four bluebirds used to perch on her arm as she practiced the piano.

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Preservation efforts are sometimes painful, admits Drum. The garden, which was created in 1927 and fully planted by the 1940s, contains several invasive plants which weren't controversial back then. The plants were chosen because birds and animals liked the food produced by them. So the gardeners today respond to English ivy's (*Hedera helix*) exuberance by hand clipping to keep it from climbing the trees and from escaping over and through the brick walls. Wisteria (*Wisteria floribunda*) and ligustrum (*Ligustrum sinense*) are also restrained by clipping. Pruning is performed differently in a bird sanctuary that has both formal and wild elements. A lot of pruning happens in the late winter and early spring. "Once the bird's nesting season begins we don't prune. We don't remove vines in summer because we don't want to disturb any nests" Drum explains.

The Clarksons were practicing nutrient recycling before it became a term associated with environmental horticulture. Three heavily treed acres supply a quantity of leaves for composting. "When the leaves fall they don't leave the property" explains Drum. "We compost all our leaves plus cruise the neighborhoods looking for more leaves. We bring in about 300 bags from the surrounding area." Not just any leaves will do for Wing Haven grounds however. Drum admits they are "leaf snobs" and will only bring in small sized (willow oak is ideal) dry leaves that are free of trash and sticks. Drum is often heard saying "The leaves feed the soil and the soil will feed the plant." The resulting compost is liberally applied to the garden beds throughout the year.

The crew waters mainly by hand or with overhead sprinklers in targeted areas. There are two wells on the site which allows them to water during drought. The wells are essential for the survival of the revenue-generating nursery plants. They fertilize with natural fertilizers such as Espoma® Plant-tone®, Holly-tone®, and Mills Magic Rose Mix fertilizer. Mills Magic contains a combination of alfalfa, fish meal, steamed bone meal, cottonseed meal, blood meal, and activated sludge. The

NPK analysis is 6-5-1. Wing Haven is the distributor of Mills Magic for the Charlotte area. The roses at Wing Haven are all antique roses. Hybrid teas were never included in the garden due to their pesticide requirements.

When plants die at Wing Haven careful consideration is given to their replacement. Original species and cultivars used by the Clarksons are usually sought and planted, except for invasives. "When we lose an invasive we plant something that is an environmentally better choice" says Drum. "Our garden plants need to provide food, nesting sites, and safe haven for the birds and other animals." Dia Steiger notes the careful considerations that come as plants age. "It's a challenge to preserve it as it was when there is a microclimate change-for instance a shade tree that gets old may become a liability and have to be removed, and now the area is in full sun." She complements Jeff Drum on his fine relationship with the valuable garden committee, "He consults with the garden committee frequently and knows them well, and he intuitively knows what they want and what the garden needs."

Bird feeding is part of the gardeners' responsibilities. The birds are fed sunflower seed, safflower seed, mixed bird food, and peanuts every day in platform feeders on the ground, or from hanging feeders. In the spring, during hatchling and nestling season, a large dog food bowl of meal worms is set out daily for the bird parents to feed from. More than 10,000 meal worms are consumed each week in spring when baby birds are present. The staff even makes homemade suet cakes for the birds from Mrs. Clarkson's original recipe. Drum is most impressed by the indigo buntings and all the warblers that visit the garden. During migration season, one never knows who will show up for dinner and a bath.

It is not money that keeps the staff at Wing Haven, it is the culture. "My gardeners are good employees and I'm proud to have them" claims Drum. "Our gardeners are happy to be here. They have a sense of what

Wing Haven is all about." Steiger describes the environment, "It is a pleasant place to be. The people make it pleasant. There's something about gardeners, they tend to be good people." She also believes the calm atmosphere and the seasonal changes to the work are appealing to staff. Jill Kitamura works in administration and greatly appreciates the people, plants, and animals at Wing Haven. "This is a peaceful place. You want to work here to keep it open and available for people to experience."

Over 11,000 people visit Wing Haven each year since the Foundation began its work. The Clarksons welcomed visitors and school groups to the garden and the tradition continues today. Wing Haven visitors can sit in the Clarkson's living room and watch a 12 minute orientation video narrated by Dick Cavett. The video brings the Clarkson's story to life and communicates the sincere passion and good management practices they extended to birds, wildlife, and people.

Most of the visitors are from the southeast but international guests frequently appear. One guest that Steiger remembers vividly was from New Jersey. It was a dreary Sunday afternoon, the temperature was in the low 30s, it was raining, and she had sent the tour hostess home as surely no one would be visiting in this weather. There was a knock at the door and a most excited woman came in. She was clutching a clipping from *Victoria* magazine. Elizabeth Clarkson had been interviewed by the now defunct magazine right before she died. This visitor had held onto that article for nine years. When she finally travelled to Charlotte, she found the Wing Haven she had read about.

What keeps visitors and volunteers coming to Wing Haven? Steiger thinks inspiration is the magnet. "Elizabeth Clarkson trained as a concert pianist, she had an artistic bent. You get to know her and you see the garden as a work of art. This was once a barren clay field. It was a dream of two people whose hard work made this. It wasn't fast and instant. Their story inspires us." Steiger also describes Wing Haven as a

sanctuary for people as well as birds and wildlife. "It's the life here-the birds, their song. The garden tantalizes all the senses-sight, smell, sound, and touch." Kitamura thinks there's something for everyone at Wing Haven, "It's different for everyone. Wing Haven meets individual people's needs. It's the spirit of the place."

Buses of school children frequent the house and gardens and make the site's storytelling mission even more pertinent. Wing Haven has an education center set aside for children that include raised bed gardens, containers, colorful bird houses nailed on a wall, mirrored windows, and a rabbit habitat for the resident rabbit, Houdini. Drum reflects, "Young people are so disconnected from nature. I've met 5th graders who had never planted anything. They didn't even know how to hold a shovel. I grew up on a farm and was surrounded by animals and plants-I played outside all the time. Kids nowadays don't have this experience." One school program that happens at Wing Haven regularly is called The Secret Garden. This is a journaling program which allows fourth graders to visit three different garden spaces where they sit down and write what they see, think, and feel. Drum and Steiger both agree the program appears powerful. "They touch things-tree bark, flowers, it's powerful." It is leading to a better future, suggests Drum.

Drum's advice to people contemplating working as historic preservation gardeners is to do it for the right reasons. "If you are going to work in historic preservation you do it for love of the property and to preserve something special. My part is small. You aren't doing it for the money. We're not getting rich in any way. It's very special to work somewhere that people come to see. People from all over the world come here and it is a pleasure to be a part of that." He also feels a sense of responsibility to the Clarksons, "When I think that two people spent their whole lives putting this environment together, it becomes my job to make sure this goes on into the future, for future generations."