

# Wing Haven: Where dreams fly free

NEWS

Wing Haven  
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OF THE NEWS STAFF

"Life, believe, is not a dream."

So says the worn flagstone, etched with the words of Charlotte Bronte at the edge of the creaking gate. But the gardens beyond give it the lie.

Wing Haven was a dream in 1927, when a determined Texan named Elizabeth Clarkson handed her husband plans for a modest garden where she'd dine, entertain, virtually live in good weather.

It's still a dream to those who wander past the white house at 248 Ridgewood Ave. into the sheltered 3½ acres behind.

There bloom idyllic pines with poetry attached by way of metal plates. There grow camellias, deceptive in their lack of fragrance but breathtaking in hue, and Solomon's seal and jack-in-the-pulpit.

There sing the birds that alight on Mrs. Clarkson's arm, pecking gingerly at her antique snuffbox full of mealworms and skittering off as soon as strangers creep forward for a better view.

Wing Haven celebrates its 54th

anniversary this spring: The garden shop is open for its semi-annual sale now through Sunday; the membership drive is on; and Mrs. Clarkson walks through the gardens marveling afresh at the friendliness of the Carolina wren.

The gardens — which she has turned over to the Wing Haven Foundation — are open Monday-Wednesday 3-5 p.m. at no charge.

If you're lucky, you may go a little earlier in the afternoon and find the gates open. You may even get the woman inside to talk about what drove her to create this peaceful plant and bird sanctuary.

"Eddie and I had met in school in Boston, and he wanted me to move to Charlotte when we married," said Mrs. Clarkson. "He was born here, you see.

"Well, I sent him the plans, and he built out in the country on a red clay lot. Most of our friends who had houses when we married have had half a dozen houses since, but we've never moved."

"Between 1927 and 1937, I bought anything anyone would give me terms on," added Mr. Clarkson. "We picked up 11 par-

cels of land. Slowly, we built the brick walls. On anniversaries and birthdays, we'd make each other presents of a thousand bricks."

And so did their garden grow. Mrs. Clarkson, whose mother had raised white-winged doves in southern Texas, decided she wanted to know "everything there was to know about birds."

She stayed outdoors all day except in winter, coming to recognize species by their markings and even individual feathered visitors. The birds grew to trust her. Catbirds and wood thrush would feed their babies on her arm.

She found a bluebird whose mother had been killed, took him and his three brothers (and their nest) inside and raised them in a wastebasket. "I fed them every 15 minutes from daylight to dark and kept them sitting on a fresh hot-water bottle," she recalled.

"Tommy lived eight years with us and never spent a night outside in his life. He bathed in a soup bowl in our bathroom and raised his babies with a wild mother in that same wastebasket."

She has sheltered about 130 species to date. The most com-



mon, she guesses, are cardinals and catbirds in the summer, Baltimore orioles in the winter.

At first, when the surrounding land lay in fields, Mrs. Clarkson saw meadowlarks and sparrows and phoebes. But as the city encroached on Wing Haven, they began to leave. Yet you can still see kingfishers fishing in the pool or green herons and woodcocks drifting around her hideaway.

Elizabeth Clarkson feeds Wing Haven bird. (News photo/Don Hunter)

sprays by city crews in the late '50s skipped her yard, have paid off.

Today, her medicinal garden and herb garden flourish. The mahonia, its seeds scattered by the birds who gobble its purple berries, overwhelms its patch of ground. ("I keep a lot of the garden wild," she explained. "The birds like tangles to nest in.")

She breeds mint and fights the wisteria and kudzu gamely and marches out to meet her airborne companions every day.

"When I make up my mind I want something, I stick to the plan," she declared. "The Lord has removed some of this place — storms took some of the trees — and we've removed a little more. But we're still here: the garden, the birds, and Eddie and me."

The garden shop will be open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. through Saturday, 2-5 p.m. Sunday. Proceeds benefit the foundation.

Individual memberships cost \$15; family memberships cost \$25. Patrons' memberships cost \$50 and entitle you to attend a patrons' party, workshops, field trips, lectures and special private tours.

Wing Haven is barrier-free for the handicapped and open to groups by appointment. Write Ann McElwee, 2817 Belvedere Ave., Charlotte 28205 or call 375-5873, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily.