

Wing Haven

House and Garden

June 1987

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Photographs by Mick Hales

For over fifty years the remarkable garden created from bare North Carolina soil by Elizabeth and Edwin Clarkson has become a Mecca for birds and bird lovers alike

Elizabeth Clarkson laughs as she recalls her first day at Wing Haven, but she has had sixty years to recover from that shock: "When Eddie and I were engaged, he drove out to Texas so that we could plan our house and garden. I drew up designs and he returned to North Carolina to buy some land. We married in April 1927, and after our honeymoon we came to Charlotte. I'll never forget the day. There sat my house, exactly as I had planned it; Eddie had even built the little pool on the terrace. But the garden was a horror. This house was sitting in the middle of bare Carolina clay fields. There was no green anywhere in sight. All I could see was sticky red mud. It looked hopeless." Elizabeth stood staring at her dream house and its nightmare garden, Eddie searched in vain for house keys. Finally, in desperation, he was forced to execute an unusual version of carry-the-bride-over-the-threshold: he jimmied a window and pushed Elizabeth into the living room.

Today Eddie and Elizabeth Clarkson are in their eighties and entertain in the same room into which Elizabeth was launched as a newlywed. "I planned this room when I was 22 and I still like it." But there was no way she was going to live with those horrible clay fields. "I started digging right away," she



says, and she didn't stop until three barren acres surrounding her house were transformed into lush well-designed gardens

Her efforts were such a success that Elizabeth, quite literally, opened up a whole new can of worms concerning the Clarkson's use and enjoyment of the Wing Haven garden. Several years after Elizabeth commenced converting red fields into green gardens, birds started to visit. The Clarksons found them intriguing and put up houses and feeders. At this time, not yet an expert, Elizabeth began feeding birds with worms from her hand. (Had she been an expert, she would have known that this is just about

impossible.) The birds loved it and more arrived daily.

Today Wing Haven is a bird sanctuary of considerable repute. The garden has attracted 142 species of winged visitors, resulting in a yearly entertainment bill that includes 3,500 pounds of birdseed. (Eddie: "It sounds like an awful lot of food, but they eat every bit.") Elizabeth always carries a pretty pink container full of worms, and every year she and Eddie hand-feed thousands of wild birds. This unusual opportunity for close-range observation has proven irresistible to many ornithologists, artists, and birders, with the happy result that Wing Haven is a regular stop along

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the flight patterns of both the watchers and the watched.

Elizabeth Clarkson planted much of Wing Haven to attract, feed, and shelter birds. But she also designed it to surprise, delight, and entertain humans. The carefully executed balance between civilized and wild is Wing Haven's glory.

The garden design is based on a cross of Lorraine laid on its side (+). The two parallel axes are called the Upper Path and the Lower Path respectively, even though there is no appreciable change in levels. At the top of the Upper Garden, east of the house, is a plaque, quoting Japanese poet Toyohiko Kagawa, that marks the beginning of the intersecting axis. This axis, the Kagawa Path, is perpendicular to the Upper Path (intersecting it to form one end of the cross of Lorraine) and runs the entire width of the garden. The house is not on axis with any of the

three main paths but instead settles into the lower-middle space defined by the cross.

The Clarksons always begin their walks in the Upper Garden. As Eddie opens a large iron gate, Elizabeth spots a towhee. She chooses a squirming worm out of her pink can and coaxes the wild creature to accept her treat. Before she actually enters the Upper Garden, she pauses to give the full text of her lecture on Wing Haven's design: "Look up every path you see. Every one has a view."

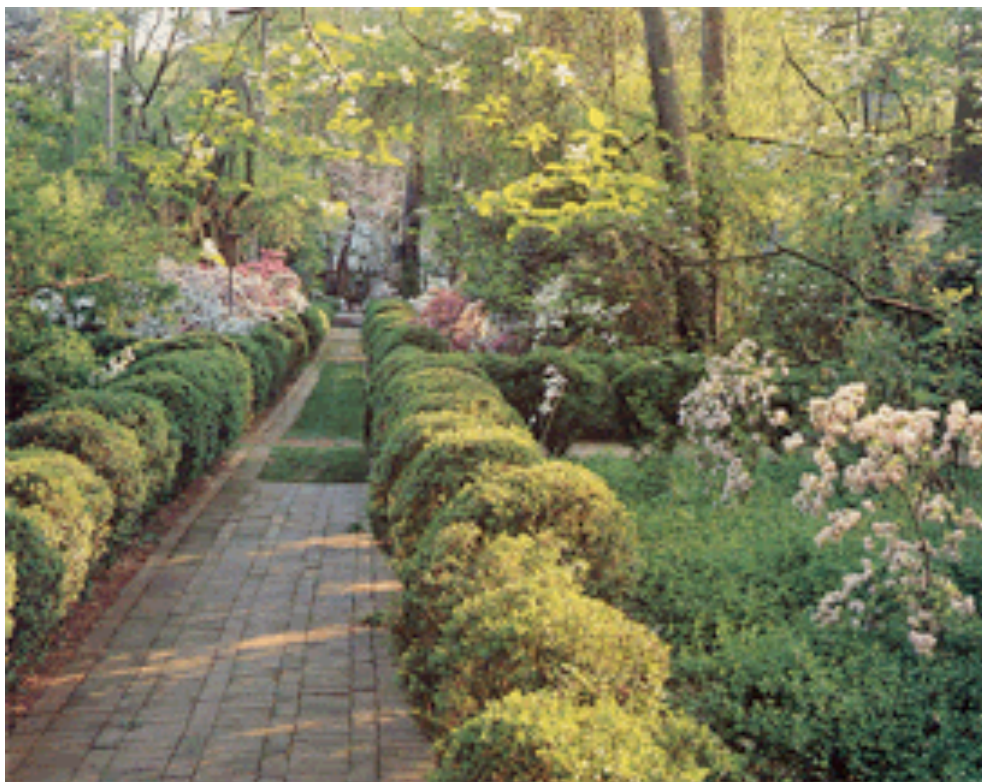
Elizabeth explains that she wanted brick paved paths as well as high walls to enclose the entire property. "So Eddie and I started giving each other bricks for Christmas, our anniversary, or just any old excuse. We finally ended up with all that I needed, about 350,000, which is almost enough to build ten houses." Walls, benches, paths, and

pools are all made or accented with brick. These hard lines are then softened with beautiful, voluptuous plantings.

The Clarksons walk around the Upper Garden along a perimeter path sheltered by many trees. Interwoven branches and tangled vines make a protective canopy along the inside of the tall boundary wall. Under this thrive hundreds of mahonia, nandina, dogwood, and ligustrum, "all planted by the birds." This thick underbrush produces bushels of berries during the winter and, along with Wing Haven's heated birdbaths, creates the avian equivalent of a February Caribbean cruise.

The Upper Path, a smooth broad swath, unobstructed by wild growth, down the middle of the Upper Garden – is a most civilized woodland clearing. It is precisely landscaped with low clipped boxwood hedges, neatly trimmed grass, and crisp brick edging. Surprisingly long and wide, this axis allows a lovely treat: an unexpected and unhindered view of the entire depth of the garden. With white chairs accenting each end, the vista is similar to the prospect available along the vast upstairs hallway sometimes found in an old-fashioned house.

Looking along straight lines is relaxing, but walking them can be boring. Elizabeth knew this and designed her wide axes-paths for eyes, not feet. That's why she and Eddie always navigate the Upper Garden by following its rambling perimeter path. Shorter brick paths, also meant for looking up, intersect the main axis and create an organized framework for small statuary and engraved plaques.



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At one intersection, old wooden supports rise above the remnants of the Clarksons' first rose garden. Most of the roses were moved from this area when surrounding trees grew tall and began to produce shade. Two remain: peachy 'Perle d'Or' and the purer pink sweetheart 'Cecile Brunner'. These old faithfuls don't seem to mind the shade, producing tiny buds which Eddie picks daily for the Clarksons' matching boutonnieres.

Scores of birds dip and rise around Elizabeth and Eddie as they rest on a bench at the beginning of the Kagawa Path. Given the setting, it is perhaps appropriate to describe this axis from a bird's-eye-view. From a branch above Elizabeth's head a wren can fly straight down a wide brick and grass path, across the Upper Path, through a vine-roofed arbor, and beyond through a precisely cut door in a privet hedge. Skimming the smooth surface of a formal pool marking the center of the garden, the bird then passes through another privet door, along a brick and grass straightaway, and crosses the Lower Path and into the woods beyond.

These woods sweep across the width of the property along the back boundary wall and provide a wild area essential for birds. Here soft-soil paths, contrasting nicely with the paved paths elsewhere, meander, allowing for stealthy wildlife stalking. Traversing the garden from east to west through this wood, one discovers a statue of Saint Fiacre, patron saint of gardens. Standing where brick paths resume, the saint marks the Lower Path, the third axis in Elizabeth's plan.

Like its parallel Upper Path, the Lower Path runs the depth of the garden and is intersected by the

Kagawa Path. Also like the Upper Path, it is neatly paved with brick and trimmed grass defined in places with boxwood hedges, taller and bushier than those along the Upper Path. The oval pool is the distant focal point, with some rather puzzling rocket-shaped objects along the way also begging for closer attention.

Elizabeth's grand plan provided a strong framework for laying out a garden where the land offered no variety to the viewer. The paths provide logical spaces for gardens with room left to encompass several specialty areas.

The direct view from the rear of the house is of the rectangular lawn of the Main Garden. Borders line both sides of the lawn, spilling soft old-fashioned colors of plumbago, crinum, and cleome onto the green grass. This is the oldest part of the Wing Haven garden and, with its reflecting pool, terrace, and evergreen Amur River privet hedge, is its most formal. Beyond the pool in the Main Garden, hidden from the house by a curtain of crape myrtle, is a charming herb garden.

The woodlands along the garden's far boundary are full of ferns and wild flowers, including the rare goldenseal. In spring, jonquils, scillas, and snowdrops break through blankets of wild ginger and evergreen sarcococca. Here Elizabeth once spied 22 goldfinches splashing, shaking, and singing in a tiny shaped pond. Carved out of the western end of the wood, near the intersection of the Kagawa and Lower paths, is an open space for a tall-growing Southern-style rose collection.



Elizabeth, recalling the fields that she started with says, "I didn't know what to do, but I knew I could do something. Over the years I tried many plants that didn't work, but I never tried a plan that didn't work."

Another plan the Clarksons have carried into fruition, which they are rightfully proud of, is the establishment of the Wing Haven Foundation. It ensures preservation of the garden and protection for the bird sanctuary and is organized to educate the public on horticultural and wildlife subjects.

The oval reflecting pool at the end of the Lower Path marks the finish of the garden walk, and the Clarksons stop here to check on the progress of a courtship. Two wood ducks paddle along the water and engage in rather vigorous flirting games as Eddie explains that the rocket-shaped objects nailed up in nearby trees are nesting boxes. If all goes well, the amorous couple will soon move into one of these dream houses. Elizabeth watches the cavorting couple and mentions that the oval pool is one of her favorite Wing Haven places: "I love the way the tops to those tall pines reflect in the water on a moonlit night." The ducks obviously agree that this is indeed a romantic spot.