

Beauty Takes Flight

Come visit a remarkable Charlotte, North Carolina, garden where birds soar. By Steve Bender, photography Ralph Anderson, styling Leigh Anne Montgomery

A statue of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of animals, watches over wildlife. ABOVE, RIGHT: Birds can't resist the sound of splashing water.



IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE A MEALWORM, 248 Ridgewood Avenue in Charlotte, North Carolina, is nowhere you want to be in springtime. Granted, you and 9,999 other worms are honored guests each week at a banquet given by cardinals, wrens, nuthatches, and brown thrashers at Wing Haven Gardens and Bird Sanctuary. Trouble is, you're also the main course.

For the rest of us, Wing Haven, the former home of Elizabeth and Eddie Clarkson, is serene and beautiful. Elizabeth was an avid gardener, originally from Uvalde, Texas. Eddie was a real estate developer and builder from a prominent Charlotte family. Together, they created a vision: a delightful urban island of flowers, flight, and birdsong, where wildlife and people meet.

Welcome Home They met in Boston where she was studying to be a concert pianist. Upon their engagement in 1926, she drew meticulous sketches of their future house. Eddie obediently followed her every instruction, except for one minor detail. When she saw the new house for the first time after their honeymoon, it stood smack in the middle of a stark, muddy cotton field with only a single spindly oak in back. She gasped, but not from delight. Eddie, survival instincts now on red alert, did what any husband wishing to see another sunrise would do. He gave his bride what she wanted most—in this case, a garden.

She designed it herself around a “double cross” of intersecting main paths that run nearly the entire length and width of the 3-acre retreat. A network of smaller paths intersects the main ones, dividing the space into individual themed gardens. Each walk or vista ends in a focal point, usually a

Shaped by clipped boxwoods, the Herb Garden contains medicinal, culinary, fragrant, and biblical herbs.

“EACH WALK or VISTA ENDS in a FOCAL POINT, usually a FOUNTAIN or STATUE.”

fountain or statue. Camellias, azaleas, bulbs, flowering cherries, wildflowers, roses, hydrangeas, and wisterias bestow bountiful color.

A Place for Birds After Elizabeth contracted a mysterious illness in the 1930s, all that doctors could recommend was extended bed rest. She became enthralled with all of the birds she could see from either her bedroom window or a cot in the garden. From that moment, she weighed each addition to the garden from the birds' point of view, necessitating the addition of numerous feeders, birdbaths, and food-producing plants such as holly, crabapple, elderberry, mahonia, and pomegranate.

She loved birds, and they loved her. In fact, she once raised an orphaned family of bluebirds and gave them full run of the house. One of them, named Tommy, slept every night for eight years on a bookshelf in her living room.

Elizabeth passed away in 1988; Eddie joined her in 1993. Today, the Wing Haven Foundation maintains the property, aided by a garden staff of three and a slew of volunteers.

The Wing Haven Difference This isn't the typical wildlife refuge. For one thing, it isn't remote. It's located on a residential street in the middle of the gracious Myers Park neighborhood. It also isn't an impenetrable tangle of vines, bushes, briars, and trees engaged in a full botanical death match. The formal elements of Elizabeth's design impose structure upon anarchic nature, guiding your eye.

Every garden, though, can use a little commotion, and here it occurs around the feeders in early morning and late afternoon. Dozens of different birds, some migratory and others permanent residents, jockey for position. Mealworms are prime rib for nesting birds, as they supply serious protein to hungry chicks. "In spring, we typically go through 10,000 mealworms a week," notes executive director Dia Steiger.

The Garden's Lesson Though the Clarksons have long departed Wing Haven, their spirits remain in the songs of the birds and the blossoms of the trees. They also imbue the many plaques embedded in walls and walkways containing prayers, poems, and biblical verses that Elizabeth felt expressed a garden's fundamental lessons.

These lines from English poet Christina G. Rossetti articulate a message both Elizabeth and Eddie understood: "Lord, purge our eyes to see
Within the seed a tree,
Within the glowing egg a bird,
Within the shroud a butterfly:
Till taught by such, we see
Beyond all creatures Thee..." ●

Wing Haven Gardens and Bird Sanctuary: 248 Ridgewood Avenue, Charlotte, NC 28209; www.winghavengardens.com or (704) 331-0664. **Hours:** 3-5 p.m. Tuesday, 10 a.m.-noon Wednesday, and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. **Suggested donation:** \$5 per adult.



Elizabeth and Eddie Clarkson built this garden for the birds.

1 From the Clarksons' house, you enter the Upper Garden through this iron gate.
2 Brightly painted birdhouses in the Children's Garden form a rainbow of avian shelters.

3 Rabbits snack from a feeder at the end of the day when no one is looking.

4 Fallen camellia blooms roll out the red carpet.

5 Morning and late afternoon are major feeding times for nuthatches.

6 A sweep of light blue starflowers, an old Southern favorite, combines with pastel pansies in the Main Garden.

7 Dozens of camellias steal the show in late winter and early spring.

8 Wing Haven's invitation to sit and listen to the birds and marvel at the flowers is impossible to resist.

9 What do birds want most from you? Start with food.



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Keys To Attracting Birds

Supply the following, and birds will eagerly flock to your garden.

- **Food**—berries, nuts, seeds, nectar, insects, spiders, and worms
- **Water**—especially splashing and shallow water
- **Nesting sites** in trees and shrubs
- **Shelter** from predators

Learn some SUREFIRE ways to attract birds to your garden: southernliving.com/current-issue