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# *secret gardens*





COURTESY OF GERALD ADAMS

# Executive O R D E R

*From roses and vegetables to herbs and fountains,  
the gardens around the governor's mansion  
are a beautiful reflection of our state.*

BY DIANE SILCOX-JARRETT



COURTESY OF GERALD ADAMS



ALEX JARRETT



COURTESY OF GERALD ADAMS

Opposite: Graceful flower beds and lush greenery frame the Queen Anne-style Executive Mansion.

Top: Accentuated by a classic wooden arbor and an ornate fountain, the Rose Garden's main focus is its abundance of brilliant blooms.

Bullnose brick edging (left and above) lends an informal ease to the elegant Victorian Garden.

If you watch for a little while you'll see people trying to peek or peer over the walls," laughs Ann Fox, a garden and house docent for the North Carolina Executive Mansion. "When the brick walls went up in the '70s, that's when curiosity took over, and people wanted to see what was on the other side. What they see now is a horticultural work-in-progress."

The work-in-progress encompasses nearly five acres located in the center of Raleigh that has been cultivated into individual living gardens enjoyed by North Carolina's first family and the public alike.

Landscaping at the mansion started with humble beginnings, and it has encountered some rough spots along the way. When the mansion was completed in 1891, there was little money allotted for sprucing up the grounds. In fact, during a visit to the Biltmore Estate, Daniel G. Fowle, the first governor to live in the mansion (1889-1891), was asked by George Vanderbilt how the house in Raleigh was coming along. The governor told Vanderbilt, "The grounds are hopeless." A sympathetic Vanderbilt sent one of his gardeners, Gifford Pinchot, on a train to Raleigh supplied with "choice specimens of shrubs."

Keeping within the mansion's Victorian style, Pinchot, who later became the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service, recommended that green plants encircle the mansion to complement the red brick and colorful tiles of the roof. Hints of Pinchot's ideas still linger: Green plantings in many different hues and textures surround the mansion, and camellias with lush, waxy leaves border the house, their rose and pink blossoms contrasting against the brick walls.

The larger trees may also have started with Pinchot. "The pin oaks are close to 100 years old," says Fox. "They could have come here on the train with Pinchot." Huge magnolias,

thought to be between 75 and 100 years old, share their sweet Southern aroma in early summer. Native North Carolina azaleas, with their full show of delicate whites and pinks, blanket the landscape, reminding everyone who sees them why spring in North Carolina is splendid.

### More recent additions

Although Pinchot brought the first plants and trees to the mansion, the gardens visitors enjoy today actually got



Cosmos blaze brilliantly in the Southwest Border Garden.

right in and started plans for making the grounds more pleasing to the eye. She received a lot of help from the Raleigh Junior League, the North Carolina Nurserymen's Association, and the North Carolina Departments of Transportation and Administration. Money was raised for plants, a sprinkler system, drainage, and an electrical system. The renovation took three years.

Martin's first creative vision was the Victorian Garden, intended to contain plantings that might have been used in the original mansion gardens.

"We tried three different hedges before one made it," she says. "Gardening at the Executive Mansion is trial and error, just like with everyone's garden."

The Victorian Garden gives the impression of being a room extended off the ballroom of the mansion. Steps leading down to the garden are decorated with two black cast-iron urns, reproductions of pre-Civil War garden pots. Planted with elephant ears, they welcome visitors back to the Victorian era. At the other end of the garden is a hand-carved limestone fountain from Italy. An enclosing wall of curly leaf ligustrum isolates the area from the rest of the grounds and forms the perimeter of the garden.

Gerald Adams, head gardener at the mansion, explains that "a Victorian garden is not one full of English plantings. It has more tropical plants and greenery. What you see in these gardens are plants that are unusual — that was their appeal."

"This garden does not show what an exact Victorian garden would look like but rather emulates a time past," he says.

The area includes a sable Palmetto Palm and a huge mahoni, which produces beautiful, blue-hued berries in the fall and winter. The pastel pinks, purples, and blues of annuals add a touch of softness.

When the Victorian Garden was first completed, it was featured in the 1989 winter issue of *Victorian Homes*. "Once that first garden was complete,

their start 20 years ago. "When [former N.C. first lady] Dottie Martin moved here in 1985, the grounds literally fell into her lap," explains Fox.

Two straight winters of freezes and ice killed much of what had been planted. "The grounds were not in very good shape. The weather had not been kind to the plants," agrees Martin.

An avid gardener herself, Martin dug

it was easy to see how much more work needed to be done," says Martin.

### Continuing the project

One of the next features designed during this time and reconstructed in 1992 is the Southwest Border with its intense colors of summer. A familiar flower in this garden is the Shirley poppy, seen frequently on the sides of North Carolina roads. The flowers' bright reds, yellows, oranges, and purples with coal-black centers set the

tone for the whole garden.

"The best feature of this garden is that any time of year you visit, you're assured something will be blooming, such as the huge Rosemary Arp plant that is in the center of the area. The bird of paradise blooms in the summer," says Adams. "One of the most unusual plants we have is the comfrey, an heirloom plant with big, fuzzy leaves."

Visitors may enjoy this garden by taking a few minutes to sit on a stone bench with the initials thought to be

those of Governor Clyde Roark Hoey (1937-1941). Sculpture featured in the garden includes a birdbath by Virginia Bullman from Hillsborough and a giraffe by Clyde Jones of Bynum.

Against the back boundary of the grounds is the Vegetable Garden cultivated under the direction of former first lady Carolyn Hunt (1977-1985, 1993-2001). In 1994, she decided to expand the back lawn and grow vegetables and fruit that could be used by the family. The Vegetable Garden gained an unusual walkway after a 1995 repair to the mansion's 100-year-old, multi-colored slate roof. Broken pieces of the original slate tiles now add color to the garden walk.

A fig tree, a favorite of the current first lady, Mary Easley, brings shade in the spring and summer, and in the fall a scuppernong grape arbor produces its luscious fruit. The bounty from the garden, including many varieties of peppers and tomatoes, is enjoyed by the staff and the family at the mansion. "We have 50 to 60 people working in the mansion each day," says Easley. "It's great to know the vegetables and herbs are being used for meals — and they taste great, too."

### Stop and smell the roses

The second-largest garden on the grounds is the Rose Garden located against the boundary wall on the left side facing the mansion. "Mrs. Martin had the roses planted so they could be used in the mansion and so passersby could catch their fragrances," explains Fox.

When the Easleys moved in, the docents asked the first lady if they could restore the garden, which had struggled through some hard winters. "It was a great idea, and I told them to run with it," says Easley. The docents responded by planting more than 100 roses.

Emerging from under a rose-covered pergola, the path through the Rose Garden leads to a semi-circle of between 50 and 75 rose varieties consisting of hybrid teas, floribunda, climbing, and those from the David Austin variety. "It is incredible to see all these beautiful blooms. I have never seen such a dense rose garden," Easley says.

In the spring, the roses are accented by iris, daisies, and tulips. In the

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summer, Oriental lilies, butterfly bush, and catmint grow at the bottom of the bushes and add color to the walkway. A water fountain, located at the end of the garden, was donated by the Sir Walter Cabinet, a group made up of spouses of North Carolina lawmakers, and is enjoyed by cardinals, robins, and blue jays.

Throughout the grounds are other gardens: the Peony, House, Woodland, and the Fall gardens. The Woodland Garden features native North Carolina plants such as ginger, columbine, foam flower, and an unusual yellow bleeding heart.

Another favorite is an old tulip tree on the northwest side. "I can see it blooming from the house," says Easley. "You know spring is here when it blooms. Every time there is an ice storm, I hope nothing bad happens to it."

What could be considered the oldest garden at the mansion is the Herb Garden located next to the kitchen. It was first used as a Victory Garden during the administration of Governor J. Melville Broughton (1941-1945). It is now the year-round home to fresh herbs such as chives, dill, and oregano. "It's nice to walk by and catch the smell of the herbs," says Fox, running her hands through some rosemary.

The best feature of the gardens at the Executive Mansion may be that they are open to those who would like to tour. "Many people come while on vacation just so they can enjoy the beauty as a family. Others are more serious, coming to see what we have created to get ideas

for their own gardens," says Adams. "My biggest challenge is to keep the feel of the turn-of-the-20th-century house while combining native North Carolina plants and trees such as dogwoods and azaleas," he says.

Catching the scent of the roses while enjoying the lushness of the grounds, it seems as though Adams has risen to his challenge. In the middle of downtown Raleigh, surrounded by traffic and government buildings, there is an oasis that has

flourished with a lot of care from governor's wives, professional gardeners, and docents. "The grounds are here for everyone," says Fox, "They are lovely and reflect the beauty of the house they surround. And the best thing of all, if you do peek over the walls to see the beautiful blossoms, you know you're welcome to come in."

*Diane Silcox-Jarrett writes from her home in Raleigh.*

## if you're going

Tours of the Executive Mansion gardens are offered each Thursday, March 10 through June 16, at 9:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. To arrange a tour for up to 30 people, call (919) 807-7948.

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