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Through Charleston's Garden Gates

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the Historic Charleston
Foundation's Festival of
Houses and Gardens

BY MELISSA BIGNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIA LYNN

The 1739 William Elliott House's garden is filled with hall-like paths punctuated with doorways formed by arbors and iron gates. OPPOSITE: Hydrangeas are as common as Southern accents in the Holy City, so-called for the proliferation of colonial-era churches.



Neighbors and passersby alike reap the pleasure of "borrowed" blooms and branches that spill over walls and elaborate wrought iron fences, varying from unruly wisteria to hanging gardens of petunias and ivy.



OME MARCH, CHARLESTON'S WINTER WINDS THAW into spring breezes that cast peppermint peach, quince, and pear tree petals onto the colonial city's slate sidewalks like a dusting of fragrant snow, and the pull here swells into something stronger than a migratory call. Tourists answer, flocking to wander the historic district's gardens, and bear witness to nature's reawakening.

Locals will tell you the draw has a lot to do with the fact that the city is all about living history, living well, and living outdoors as much as possible. When those concepts collide with Southern hospitality (and spring), the results include some of America's most picturesque gardens, gently placed shoulder-to-shoulder along cobblestone streets, with wrought iron gates and pierced brick walls inviting you to sneak a peek with every stroll.

During colonial times, each home here typically maintained a pleasure garden, a kitchen garden, and a work yard (used for household tasks such as chopping wood, making soap, and preparing poultry). Parterre layouts dominated as a carryover from the Old World. Beds outlined in red brick were rimmed with low-slung boxwood hedges that framed everything from fruit trees to flowers and sculptures. Crushed oyster-shell paths meandered past, and the more well-to-do the family, the more elaborate the patterns and plantings.

After the Revolutionary War, Charleston singles—houses that are a single room wide, run perpendicular to city streets, and are hung with porches, or piazzas—began to take over the Holy City. These homes sport false front doors that open onto wide piazzas stocked with rockers, settees, joggling boards, and dining tables. In the 1800s, still-prevalent parterre gardens were most often relished from these piazzas, where families socialized and where the garden's overall design could be best viewed.

As work yards disappeared and as kitchen plots gave way to market trips, pleasure gardens overtook the spare acreage. By the time famed landscape architect Loutrel Briggs came to Charleston in the late 1920s, gardens had been benignly neglected since Reconstruction. Vestiges—crumbling walls and Spanish moss-choked trees—were as much a marvel to him as the remaining pristine plots. To celebrate both, he authored *Charleston Gardens* in 1951 and featured historic plans alongside his own snapshots of the spaces. The volume showcased the transition from formal parterre gardens of the past to the outdoor room-upon-room layouts he—and the city—eventually became famous for.

Today, more than two decades after Hurricane Hugo both devastated and revived Charleston (insurance money put an end to the patch-and-go approach to home and garden repairs that had long been de rigueur here), a revived Briggs garden is as treasured a selling point as a Tiffany stained-glass window. And gardens in styles from the 17th century to now are lived in more than ever. Need proof? Head south of Broad Street, where a hand-painted sign on one home's picket fence directs passersby to "please throw the ball" to a friendly and eager family dog waiting with said ball. On any given Saturday, you can stumble upon a backyard wedding, a baby's sip-and-see on a piazza, or a dinner party taking over a flagstone courtyard. Here, the styled outdoor life has ruled for nearly three centuries; no wonder the town's got the hang of it.



GAILLARD-BENNETT HOUSE (circa 1800)



AT A GLANCE: The Montagu Street property includes a Federal-style house, kitchen house, carriage house, pool, and pool house.

GARDEN BEFORE AND AFTER: When Mary Caroline and Steve Stewart bought the property in 2004, the gardens amounted to bits and pieces of shrubbery and grassy patches with perhaps 10 trees scattered about. Working with local landscape architect Sheila Wertimer, they did scrapings on the lot to no avail in an effort to determine where old beds and paths had been. When the neighboring 1960s ranch house was for sale, they purchased that lot, razed the home, and expanded their property to one-and-a-quarter acres. Sheila devised the overall design, Steve was in charge of the hardscapes, infrastructure, and irrigation systems, and Mary Caroline chose and plotted the plants.

BY THE NUMBERS: Six fountains are on the property, and they laid 200,000 bricks for walkways.

INSPIRATION: "I wanted very formal gardens," says Mary Caroline, "so I went to Louisa Pringle Cameron's garden and read her books, took lots of garden tours, read Mrs. Whaley's and James Cothran's books, and I did research. I wanted parterres and garden rooms that flowed from one to the other, and for it to be more formal toward the house and then less so away from house."

HOW THEY LIVE OUTSIDE: Spring and fall are the main times you'll find the Stewarts in their garden. They gravitate to the pool and pool house, and have parties out there every warm-weather holiday.

The Stewarts tackled their garden in stages, beginning around the main house and working their way out. Steve oversaw the fountains, a pool, and the mix of flagstone and brick paths, while Mary Caroline tended to the plants.



"It's constantly changing, and I'm always pulling out a plant here and there. I've learned you can't just plant it and be done. There's always something going on out there."

—MARY CAROLINE STEWART

JOHN BLAKE HOUSE (circa 1800)

"One of the great things about Charleston gardens is the element of surprise they hold. That's what we wanted to create with this one. There's an eight-and-a-half-foot hedge cutting through the garden from one side to another right now, and there's no telling what's behind it. That keeps things interesting."

—MARK MARESCA



AT A GLANCE: When it was built, this four-bedroom, three-bath Charleston single house had a grand view of the Ashley River. However, when South Battery and Murray Boulevard were filled in for more development in the early 20th century, the house receded into a residential area.

GARDEN BEFORE AND AFTER: The garden and parterre beds with its 18th-century bricks appear in Loutrel Briggs' 1951 book, *Charleston Gardens*. There were hardy flowering plants therein, but when Melissa and Mark Maresca moved in 11 years ago, the garden had become overgrown. Mark edited out scores of plants, leaving in a mix of boxwoods, aspidistra, autumn ferns, and sago palms. Aiming for a lush, green space where texture and structures star, Mark worked with landscape architect Hugh Dargan to re-create much of the 18th-century garden by restoring the parterres, and laid out an overall square with subdivided spaces that all open onto a central focal point—a sculpture from the late 1700s. Color comes with the annuals Mark adds in seasonally.

BY THE NUMBERS: There are four seating areas in the garden.

HOW THEY LIVE OUTSIDE: Mark gardens almost daily. They entertain in the garden, sit in the rockers, and enjoy it from the main house as the windows offer myriad views.

"As an architect I think in terms of graphic elements, and that works in gardening, too," says homeowner Mark Maresca. "You can look at layout all in terms of positives and negatives, voids and masses."

WILLIAM ELLIOTT HOUSE (circa 1739)

"The size of the garden appealed to me from the onset; it's large enough for entertaining and small enough to manage and enjoy."

—MONICA SEEGER



AT A GLANCE: Cited in Jonathan Poston's *The Buildings of Charleston* as "one of the oldest surviving Charleston single houses," it consists of a three-and-a-half story home and carriage house on a small urban lot on lower King Street.

GARDEN BEFORE AND AFTER: When Monica and Kenneth Seeger moved into the home in 2010, the garden that had been designed by Loutrel Briggs needed some TLC. They hired Sheila Wertimer to perform the resuscitation, and Monica got what she had craved: a space that celebrated Briggs' original layered layout and included statuary Monica had brought from California.

BY THE NUMBERS: Technically there are two gardens here, the pleasure garden and a kitchen garden with herbs.

HOW THEY LIVE OUTSIDE: Monica says the garden is "large enough for entertaining and small enough to manage and enjoy." It's part of the garden tour circuit every spring, and she often invites curious passersby to come closer for a better look. Given it's visible from most rooms and, of course, the piazzas, the Seegers take in the view all day long, all year long.

Patios such as Monica Seeger's turn into alfresco rooms in a city with nearly year-round temperate weather. "One of the things we did early on was to plant mature specimens, rather than wait for the garden to mature," says Seeger.



NATHANIEL RUSSELL HOUSE (circa 1808)

AT A GLANCE: The neoclassical, three-story, nine-room brick mansion on Meeting Street is a house museum operated by the Historic Charleston Foundation. It was purchased by the group in 1955, and served as their headquarters for 37 years until they outgrew the space.

GARDEN BEFORE AND AFTER: Curators with the Historic Charleston Foundation say the 1808 gardens included geometric parterres, an orchard, and a work yard with vegetable and herb gardens. Atypical for Charleston, where most front doors and/or piazza doors open onto a city sidewalk, the main house sits some 30 feet into the lot, and one can only enter after passing through the garden. It's also unique in that rather than sporting long porches that look out and open onto the yard, the house is hung with small wrought iron balconies here and there. Today, the garden's main features include a circular planted bed with boxwood hedges, brick borders, and a surrounding path; a lawn with an arbor and shaded benches; antique brick pathways; and a mix of crepe myrtles and live oak trees. However, Museum Manager Lauren Northup aims to restore the gardens to more a period-correct plan than the current style, award-winning as it may be, which was established in the 1980s.

HOW IT'S LIVED IN: Tours of the house are held Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sunday, 2-5 p.m. †

"There is certainly a connection between the garden and the interior of the house; the plants functioned as subjects for conversation and comment just as the furnishings and interiors did," says curator Brandy Culp.



"In 1818, William Faux wrote in his travel journal that he 'called on the venerable Nathaniel Russell, Esq., residing in a splendid mansion, surrounded by a wilderness of flowers, and bowers of myrtles, oranges, and lemons, smothered with fruit and flowers....'"

—BRANDY CULP, HISTORIC CHARLESTON FOUNDATION CURATOR

