



SECRET
GARDENS

Explore WNC's hidden botanical wonders

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Secret gardens: Unlock the magic of WNC's botanical wonders

By Jen Nathan Orris on 07/30/2013

In the lesser-known public gardens of Western North Carolina, bamboo bursts from the soil, maple trees shade walls of stone and sculptures rise from the earth. From the grounds of a 19th century inn to a whimsical West Asheville plot, our region offers the chance to experience the same sense of wonder that filled 10-year-old Mary Lennox when she turned a rusty key in an old gate and discovered the world of the classic children's book *The Secret Garden*.

Whether you encounter a half-wild grove of branches and vines or a proper English garden fit for a king, the feeling of amazement is the same, full of hidden passageways and surprising plants. You just need to know where to look. Go beyond the manicured pathways with this guide to a few of the region's best-kept garden secrets.



Open the gate

It's hard to resist the intimate coves and dense greenery of the 1889 WhiteGate Inn & Cottage near downtown Asheville. The gardens got a modern update when Ralph Coffey and partner Frank Salvo bought it in 1999. Coffey moved approximately 450 of his favorite perennials and shrubs from Lake Norman, near Charlotte, to create the inn's backyard garden where once there was just an expanse of grass. Conifers, red-veined begonias and flowering hibiscus line the bed-and-breakfast's meandering paths, and cozy sitting areas create an elaborate maze that lure casual visitors like a Siren's call.

Coffey invites visitors to experience a "kaleidoscope of color where you don't have to do anything but enjoy." The experience is different each season, with pinks and lavender in the spring, vibrant greens in the summer and a display of yellows, oranges and reds in the fall.

The garden also lends its own botanical tunes: One of the garden's most startling plants is *Euphorbia stricta*, a small biennial with seedpods that make a snapping sound when they pop open. "What I love about the garden itself is just the different textures, shapes and colors of the trees and conifers and how all that blends together," Coffey says.

The public is welcome to wander through the garden, though the grounds are designed primarily for the inn's guests, he explains. There's no need to make an appointment, but if you want to see the inn's greenhouse, which contains approximately 1,500 orchids and tropical plants, it's best to call ahead, Coffey mentions.

He's also happy to guide visitors through the stone walkways, pointing out distinctive plants and water features. Each unique tree and flower makes this centrally located, yet lushly private, utopia the perfect place to start your secret garden tour. whitegate.net, 173 E. Chestnut St., Asheville.