Cool Coastal Gardens

Historic live oak trees beckon you to venture into the cool, green shade. Oceans of lawn and waves of flowers open up the views while hedges of shrubs hide secret gardens that await discovery.

While visiting the beautiful Cape Fear or Brunswick Island Beaches along the southern North Carolina Coast, take time to tour two prominent and historic gardens.

1-Day Itinerary

Day 1

Airlie Gardens is a historic seaside garden began in 1901 on the grounds of a 1735 estate. The 67-acre gardens have been lovingly restored for year-round public enjoyment.

Orton Plantation Gardens was designed around a 1735 mansion; this historic garden includes formal flower gardens and 20 acres of secluded walking trails. Open during the months of March through November.



With so much to see and do in the area, we recommend the following 1-day itinerary. Enjoy your visit by mixing and matching events to your particular interest. Be sure to check days and hours of operation for each venue.

Day One

Savor Breakfast (1 hour)

In Wilmington, the **Sweet and Savory Bakeshop & Cafe** is perfect for omelets, entrees and croissant sandwiches. They bake their own 21-layer croissants! Located at 1611 Pavilion Place, this great breakfast café is just one mile from Airlie Gardens.

Gardens by the Sea (2-3 hours)

Over 100,000 azaleas gloriously adorn the 65-acre **Airlie Gardens** grounds for springtime color! With so many other flowers and shrubs to enjoy, these seaside gardens are also perfect for strolling throughout the year.

Your self-guided tour of nine gardens includes tranquil Showcase Gardens with themes of Japanese, Tuscan, Low Country and Mediterranean influence.

For bird watching, walk the peaceful .03-mile Nature Trail through a shady corridor of azaleas, magnolias and pines as it circles one side of the 10-acre Airlie Lake.

The romantic Pergola Garden is reminiscent of European estates. From here, enjoy the view as beautiful white swans skim silently across the serene Airlie Lake.

The large Camellia Garden includes not only camellias, but also a glorious 150-foot trellis of roses. The connecting Spring Garden is filled with wide swaths of flowers.

Don't miss the gigantic Airlie Oak that dates back to 1545. This oak is a monument to nature and a statement to the historic value of these marvelous gardens.

Ocean View Lunch

The **Oceanic Restaurant** is a landmark dining spot at Wrightsville Beach, only three miles from Airlie Gardens. The upstairs dining room provides window views of the Atlantic Ocean or you can sit outside to feel the sea breezes. The menu is loaded with seafood specialties, salads, sandwiches and burgers.

Tip: To go to Orton Plantation from Wrightsville Beach, you can drive south on US 421 past Carolina Beach to Fort Fisher. From Fort Fisher, you can take a NC Ferry for a 30-minute trip to the village of Southport and go north on NC 133. If you choose to take the ferry, be

sure to check the schedule for departures and fees. For a faster drive, go back to Wilmington and take NC 133 south to Orton.

The **NC Aquarium** is located at Fort Fisher if you have time to visit before your ferry trip.

Making A Scene (2 hours)

Drive through the shady Avenue of Oaks. The live oak trees drip with Spanish moss. There is something familiar about this approach. Indeed, **Orton Plantation Gardens** set the stage for over forty movies and television scenes.

Scenes for the popular TV series, *One Tree Hill* and *Dawson's Creek*, were filmed at Orton. *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *A Walk to Remember* and *Firestarter* are among the feature movies that were filmed on location at Orton.

Once a colonial rice plantation, **Orton Plantation Gardens** sprawl along the beautiful Cape Fear River. The 20-acre gardens provide both formal and natural settings for leisurely strolls and wildlife viewing. There are alligators in the acres of rice marshes along the river, so stay on the marked paths!

Historic Orton has been in the Sprunt family since 1884. Orton House, of antebellum architecture, is still a personal residence. The great-grandfather of the current owner restored the estate following twenty years of abandonment after the Civil War.

Flowers and shrubs flourish throughout the formal gardens. Gardenias, hydrangeas, and roses are among the beautiful displays. Expanses of lawn open up to vistas of the Cape Fear River. The terraced gardens provide overlooks of formal, scroll hedges that are filled with colorful floral patterns.

With so many photographic opportunities, why not make your own scene?

Ports Call You to Dinner

Wonderful dinner options await you in either the port city of Wilmington or the quaint village of Southport. Both locations are great for water views, shopping and strolling historic neighborhoods.

Along the river in downtown Wilmington, **The Pilot House Restaurant** serves seafood and southern cuisine. Start with *Fried Green Tomatoes* followed by a *Seafood Platter* or *Southern Chicken*.
On a nice evening, dine outside to watch the boats sail the river.

In Southport, head for the marina for dinner. A local favorite, **PJ's Restaurant** provides views of the waterfront including the Bald Head Island and Caswell lighthouses. Try the *Peel-and-Eat Shrimp* that is served with sides of *slaw*, *hushpuppies and corn on the cob*. Make sure you check out the daily specials, too!

Airlie Gardens is located on Airlie Road in **Wilmington**, off US 74/76, just before crossing the drawbridge to **Wrightsville Beach**.

Orton Plantation Gardens is located in Winnabow, off NC 133, only 18 miles south of Wilmington and 12 miles north of **Southport**.

By Freda Cameron March 2009

