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A garden of grace

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A Garden of Grace

By Marie Hodge

NOT FAR FROM DOWNTOWN AIKEN, TUCKED AWAY FROM THE WHIZZING TRAFFIC ON WHISKEY ROAD AT DUPREE PLACE, IS A LITTLE GEM CALLED HOPELANDS GARDENS. QUIET, SOFTLY SHADED AND UNOBTRUSIVE, IT'S A 14-ACRE RETREAT WHERE VISITORS CAN ESCAPE LIFE'S HECTIC PACE AND BASK IN THE GRACIOUS WORLD OF A CENTURY AGO.

It was about the turn of the 20th century when Northerners Charles and Hope Iselin built their winter home on the spot, lavishing it with deodar cedars, live oaks, dogwoods and magnolias. He was a sportsman famous for his involvement in six America's Cup yacht races; she was known as "the great lady of racing" for her stables and keen interest in thoroughbreds. Their life in Aiken was idyllic.

Although the Iselin home is no longer in existence, you can almost feel the spirits as you come up the brick driveway toward home. That's because there's a memorial of sorts where the home's foundation still stands—three brick reflecting pools with fountains. A short stroll away is the tiny home the Iselins built as a playhouse and schoolroom for their children. Called The Dollhouse, it's now overseen by the Aiken Garden Club, which restored it lovingly in the 1970s. It is open to the public on Sundays.

Depending on what time of year you visit, you might enjoy plantings of irises or camellias or dianthus or impatiens as you listen to birds chirping happily overhead. But the vast majority of the acreage showcases magnificent trees and lush carpets of English ivy.

Down at the man-made lakes, families picnic and call out to each other as they feed a dozen different varieties of ducks. A bandstand sits and waits for Monday-night concerts during the summer. During the holidays, hundreds of lights brighten the park's trees and walkways.

Because this is land where horses were raised and greatly loved, it's fitting that the Aiken Thoroughbred Racing Hall of Fame and Museum is tucked away in a corner of the grounds. If you're a racing fan, you might enjoy walking down memory lane with Pleasant Colony, Swale or, perhaps, Kelso.

Perhaps the most unique feature is the Touch and Scent Trail, where Braille plaques invite the visually impaired to reach out and touch a clump of bamboo or stretch to sniff a winter daphne shrub with its sweet-smelling spring blooms. The gardens, which Mrs. Iselin bequeathed to the City of Aiken upon her death, are a wonderful place to kick back for a long, lazy afternoon—and best of all, it's free.



The Thoroughbred Racing Hall of Fame and Museum

Hopelands Summer Concert Series

