

landscape

JACKSONVILLE'S LONG LOST GARDENS

Rediscovering Ellen Biddle Shipman's masterpiece

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Opposite: The Italian Garden designed by Ellen Biddle Shipman in 1931, now restored to its former glory, reflects her trademarks: layered plantings, lush borders and seating areas. It was inspired by the Cummers' visit to Italy the previous year. The marble fountain, recast in 2001, is ringed by hedges and a gloriollette (pergola) clothed in climbing fig. **Right:** The ancient Cummer Oak spreads over brick piers and columnar arborvitaes.

timeline: cummer gardens

1890s The Cummer family, Michigan lumber barons, begins settling in Jacksonville, Florida

1903 Michigan landscape architect Ossian Cole Simonds, proponent of the "middle-western movement," designs landscape plan for family compound under direction of Ninah Cummer

1910 Philadelphia nurserymen and designers Thomas Meehan and Sons plan landscape that includes English Garden

1930 Arthur and Ninah Cummer go on trip to Italy, return loaded with garden ornaments

1931 Ellen Biddle Shipman designs her masterwork — the Italian Garden — on site of former garage

1950s Italian Garden becomes very overgrown

1961 Opening of Cummer Gallery (later renamed Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens)

1999 Restoration of Italian Garden begins; hundreds of azaleas replanted

2008 *A Legacy in Bloom*, by Judith Tankard, celebrates a century of Cummer gardens



Early in the 20th century, a thousand miles from the Northeast hotbed of landscape design, a Florida lumber family began creating a showcase of gardens designed by some of the country's top talent, including the renowned New York landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman. Her name was all but lost to history until about 10 years ago when Shipman's role was rediscovered, and a campaign was mounted to revitalize the sleeping gardens. Today the impeccable restorations are filled with rare horticultural specimens as well as reflecting pools, fountains, arbors and an extraordinary collection of garden ornament and sculpture that complements the museum's interior collections.

Along the banks of the St. Johns River, the landscapes at the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens in Jacksonville nestle under the wide canopy of the famed Cummer Oak, reputed to be one of the oldest live oak trees in Florida. The museum preserves and celebrates the legacy of the Cummer family, who came from a long line of Michigan lumber barons and settled in Jacksonville around 1900. One of the first things they did there was to confer with the Midwestern landscape architect, Ossian Cole Simonds, about their extensive family compound. Simonds enhanced the stands of majestic live oaks along the riverfront with naturalistic sweeps of spirea, barberry, lilacs and forsythia in an informal landscaping style that provided a backbone for later ornamental gardens. About seven years later, the Philadelphia nurserymen Thomas Meehan and Sons augmented the grounds with crape myrtle, pomegranate, date palm and other trees and shrubs that were more suited to the Southern climate. They also created an English

Garden, a formal flower garden with brick paths and a central sundial, filled with dozens of traditional perennials such as daylilies, peonies, irises and cascades of climbing roses. The outstanding feature of this new garden was the spectacular wisteria-laden cypress arbor overlooking the river.

Ninah Cummer, whose husband was head of the Cummer Lumber Company, was passionately interested in gardening — although she didn't lift a finger herself. She kept improving and fine-tuning the gardens, adding low pittosporum hedges to create more areas for lilies, agapanthus and amaryllis, and carving out other areas as needed. She began collecting antique garden ornaments, such as bird baths, wall plaques, urns and statuary, as well as new pieces crafted by Pennsylvania artist William Mercer that all needed a place in the gardens. Ninah shared her passion for gardening with her sister-in-law, Clara Cummer, who also lived in the compound. They later became friendly rivals as they developed their respective areas. Clara later commissioned William Lyman Phillips of the Olmsted firm to design extensive gardens.

The jewel in the crown of the Cummer Museum today is the magnificent Italian Garden, designed by Shipman in 1931. It was conceived as the ultimate display garden for Ninah's large collection of Italian marble garden ornaments and hundreds of azaleas (Ninah was one of the first to introduce azaleas into northeast Florida). This new garden provided the perfect companion to the earlier English Garden, both of which overlook the river. Two long reflecting pools, flanked by Shipman's signature flower borders, frame the view to the green, ficus-covered gloriolite that resembles the famous water gardens at the Villa Gamberaia in Tuscany. Ninah and her husband had visited Italy the previous year, returning home with a boatload of ornaments, including a large stone fountain, benches and lions.

Shipman designed the new garden so it could be enjoyed aesthetically and sensually from several vantage points: from the upper terrace and from the riverfront. The carefully orchestrated color scheme ranged from pale-toned azaleas in the foreground to more brilliantly colored annuals in the distance. The two long pools reflected the blue sky, and roses gracefully drooped over the sides. She added plenty of ornamental shrubs and small trees for screening around the edges of the garden, shrubs in the flower borders for eye-level appeal, and low-growing masses of perennials and annuals expertly arranged for color and texture at one's feet. Climbers on the walls and regularly spaced standards of roses, camellias and wisteria increased the lushness of the scheme. Among the drifts of flowers, clipped evergreens or tubs of small trees served to strengthen the architectural framework.

The gardens reached their apogee in the late 1930s, when they were ablaze with hundreds of azaleas set amidst a stunning collection of garden ornaments, including a large fountain on the riverfront vista. By the 1950s, the once-splendid gardens were a mere shadow of their former glory. By then, Ninah was focusing her energies on building an art collection that became the foundation for the present museum. The gardens later faded into history, and their recent rehabilitation involved sweeping away overgrown trees and shrubs, and replanting hundreds of azaleas and other plants following Shipman's original suggestions. But despite some initial problems (some of which Ninah also encountered), the Italian Garden today is a remarkable testimony to the energy of both Ninah Cummer and Ellen Shipman. The restoration of the Italian Garden has generated even more interest in the work of Shipman, and the list of her other gardens now under

restoration continues to grow.

The English Garden has also been revitalized, and future plans include restoring the Olmsted firm's gardens that were once part of Clara Cummer's property. The museum has engaged Belgian landscape architect François Goffinet to prepare a master plan for the expanding campus and to oversee the restoration of the historic Olmsted area. SEE SOURCEBOOK FOR MORE INFORMATION, PAGE 76



DESIGNER PROFILE: ELLEN BIDDLE SHIPMAN

A nationally prominent landscape architect, Ellen Biddle Shipman (born in 1869) began her career in 1912 after training with the country house architect Charles Platt. By the time she closed her New York office in 1946, she had designed well over 600 gardens, located mostly in the Northeast and Midwest. Few of her gardens survive today, exceptions being the Italian Garden at the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens in Jacksonville, Longue Vue House and Gardens in New Orleans, the English Garden at Stan Hywet Hall in Akron, Ohio, the Sarah P. Duke Gardens in Durham, North Carolina, and a handful of others. Shipman was renowned for her artistic planting style based on her horticultural expertise. Her exquisite layered plantings — composed of annuals, perennials and small shrubs arranged for color and textural effects — were highly sought after by her clients, yet proved difficult to maintain except by trained gardeners. Her clients were almost exclusively garden-club women who had the knowledge and means to support her style of design. Shipman was an active advocate for women in the profession, training many successful designers in her office. She was also an active lecturer, and her gardens were routinely featured in *House Beautiful*, *House and Garden*, and other popular magazines. After her death in 1950, her style of gardening went out of fashion. It has been only in recent years that her importance has been recognized, with the result that some of her remaining gardens have been restored.

For more information, see *The Gardens of Ellen Biddle Shipman* (Abrams/Sagapress, 1996) and *A Legacy in Bloom: Celebrating a Century of Gardens at the Cummer* (Cummer Museum, 2008), both by Judith B. Tankard.