Evans’ legacy lives on through her bold and enigmatic paintings, which now hang in galleries, museums, and private collections around the world. While at Airlie Gardens, be sure to visit the Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden and Bottle Chapel. See how local artists have paid homage to this remarkable artist through their interpretation of her work.

A Brief History

Airlie Gardens’ history dates back to 1884, when Pembroke and Sarah Jones bought the property on Shell Road (now called Airlie Road) and commissioned German landscape architect Rudolf Topel to transform it into a picturesque garden. The Joneses were wealthy industrialists noted for their lavish entertaining who used Airlie to accommodate their guests and parties.

The formal gardens date back to 1901, reaching peak development of the estate in the late 1920s. There was a reported half million azaleas, 5,000 camellias, and scores of other plants finding their way as part of Airlie’s landscape; many of these are still blooming today.

In addition to the preservation of this unique property, the county is dedicated to environmental education. As one of the last undeveloped tracts along Bradley Creek, Airlie is one of the few places in this mostly urban county where one can receive a first hand experience of the dynamic tidal creek ecosystem. Airlie’s Environmental Education Program seeks to educate youth and adults about flora, fauna, and environmental topics affecting our coastal area.

Minnie Evans, Artist of Airlie

Minnie Evans was the gatekeeper at Airlie Gardens from 1949 to 1974. Considered to be one of America’s most important visionary artists, the lush backdrop of Airlie’s flora and fauna helped form the inspiration for her artwork. To illustrate her art’s connection to the plant life at Airlie, Minnie once stated, “Green is God’s color. He has 600 and some shades of green.”
1. Airlie Oak. This majestic live oak, dates back to 1545, and is the North Carolina State Champion Live Oak. One of the largest trees of its kind in the Carolinas.

2. Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden. Featuring The Bottle Chapel constructed with over 4000 colorful glass bottles, metal sculptures, and mosaics. All the sculptures were designed by area artists as a tribute to Minnie Evans.

3. Tranquility Garden. This area is surrounded by gardens featuring private spaces and areas of reflection. Sit quietly in the butterfly house and watch butterflies float gracefully by.

4. Pergola Garden. Added to the Garden in the early 1900s, this structure is built of coquina and surrounded by seasonally changing flowers. Just above the garden sits the Mystery Grave.

5. Camellia Garden. This is a wonderful place to view the majesty of an old oak grove and a vast collection of antique camellias planted in the early 1900s. This garden also features a 150-foot rose trellis.

6. Spring Garden. Designed in the early 1900s, this garden features spring flowering bulbs, colorful azaleas, towering oaks and a tranquil fountain. Also the site of the first North Carolina Azalea Festival.

7. Mount Lebanon Chapel. This chapel was built in 1835 by Dr. Thomas Henry Wright. According to his wishes, the Chapel and its tract of land was deeded to St. James Church. The Chapel was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. Still a house of worship for St. James and St. Andrews on the Sound, please respect their property when viewing.

8. Bradley Creek and Airlie Lake. Here you can experience a rare occurrence: a tidal creek ecosystem on one side, a freshwater lake on the other. Created in 1902, the lake provides guests wonderful wildlife viewing opportunities.

9. Bradley Creek Pier. Used primarily for educational purposes, Bradley Creek Pier offers for visitors and schoolchildren a space for learning about our rich environment. It also provides a unique view eastward to Wrightsville Beach — beautiful spot to just relax.

10. Seasonal Display Garden. These garden beds are replanted with each season. The tulips announce spring, followed by summer annuals, colorful fall mums and finally a hot house goes up with poinsettias and other holiday flowers to wow our guests.

While visiting, you will be able to tour at your own pace using the self-guided walking tour indicated on this map. Trams are available for those who have difficulty walking, benches and stops are indicated with a T on the map.

Garden Tour

- 1. Airlie Oak
- 2. Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden
- 3. Tranquility Garden
- 4. Pergola Garden
- 5. Camellia Garden
- 6. Spring Garden
- 7. Mount Lebanon Chapel
- 8. Bradley Creek and Airlie Lake
- 9. Bradley Creek Pier
- 10. Seasonal Display Garden