

THE GARDENS AT *Rienzi*

Rienzi is the house museum for European decorative arts of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Designed by prominent Houston architect John Staub in 1952, the house is situated on more than four acres of wooded gardens in the Homewoods division of the River Oaks neighborhood. Formerly the home of philanthropists Carroll Sterling Masterson and Harris Masterson III, and opened to the public in 1999, Rienzi houses a substantial collection of European decorative arts and paintings. Rienzi welcomes visitors for tours, family programs, lectures, music performances, and a variety of special events.

Rienzi's gardens, designed by the noted landscape architect Ralph Ellis Gunn in the 1950s, are an accomplished combination of formal gardens and natural Texas woodlands. The property is nestled on two sides by steep ravines leading to Buffalo Bayou. The variety in elevation has resulted in a range of native plant communities, from floodplain species to upland forest trees such as beech and southern magnolia.

Today, Rienzi's gardens are beautifully maintained by Garden Club of Houston. Seasonal plants and flowers bloom throughout the year; springtime guests will be welcomed by a particularly delightful palette of colors.

HELPFUL INFORMATION FOR VISITORS

- Allow approximately 45 minutes for your self-guided tour of the gardens. Please wear flat-heeled shoes.
- No food or drinks are permitted. There are no picnic facilities at Rienzi. Smoking is prohibited in all areas.
- Visitors may take photographs in the gardens, but professional photography and use of tripods are not allowed.
- The garden statues are part of the art collection; please do not touch or climb on them.

MFA *Rienzi*

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1. CAMELLIA GARDEN

Several varieties of camellia japonicas grow in the Camellia Garden, including Kramer's Supreme, Mathotiana Supreme, Debutante, and Giulio Nuccio. Many of them have been at Rienzi since it was built. Pink Ruffle azaleas border this area and add additional color during the spring.

2. POOL GARDEN

Rienzi's reflecting pool is flanked by symmetrical rose beds filled with Hybrid Tea Roses. Nearby, six different varieties of azaleas, including Judge Solomon, Pink Ruffle, Pink Pearl, Dixie Beauty, Formosa, and Daphne Salmon, create a dramatic display of pink color during the spring. During May, white flowers, such as Southern magnolias, sweet olive, and gardenias, are in bloom. Sculptures by Texas artists Carol Crow and Charles Umlauf add to this tranquil space.

3. MRS. PARKER'S FOUNTAIN GARDEN

The most formal of Rienzi's gardens, Mrs. Parker's Fountain Garden consists of an elegant parterre created by dwarf boxwoods planted in swooping arabesques. White azaleas and Southern magnolias create a screen between the garden and the ravine below. According to Mr. Masterson, the fountain, the focal point of this garden, originally belonged to a family friend, Mrs. Bess Smith "Money" Parker.

4. WHITE GARDEN

The White Garden is one of the most spectacular gardens at Rienzi, especially during March. Winding pathways weave visitors through this bountiful garden of G. G. Gerbing, Fielder's White, and Kate Arendall azaleas, spirea, and a saucer magnolia and other native trees.

5. CRANE GARDEN

The Crane Garden is named for the oversized bronze sculpture of a crane standing on the back of a dragon-like turtle that is in the garden. By using the textures of black river stones, lava rock, and monkey grass, the garden evokes the feel of a Japanese garden. Ralph Ellis Gunn introduced this garden in the early 1970s, when the Mastersons added the adjacent Ballroom and Gallery to the house.

6. BULB GARDEN

When in bloom, the Bulb Garden displays an array of colors. Each year the bulbs are rotated and have at various times included tulips, paper whites, and hyacinths, among others. It is home to the newly conserved statue *La Fée aux Fleurs* by the sculptor Mathurin Moreau.

7. MRS. TURNER'S GARDEN

Mrs. Turner's Garden is a quiet seating area near the driveway. It is named for Carroll Masterson's mother, Isla Carroll Sterling Turner, who once owned the bricks used there. Mrs. Masterson took them to Rienzi after her mother's death and made this lovely garden with them.

8. LADY GANDES GARDEN

The Lady Gandes Garden is named for the 19th-century figure of Lady Gandes that stands at its center. The sculpture's medium, coadestone, was invented in the 18th century by Eleanor Coade. It is a composite material that resembles carved limestone when cast. S-scrolled boxwoods framing the sculpture are accentuated with Salmon Solomon azaleas and fragrant Little Gem magnolias.

9. WOODS WITH FERNS GARDEN

This garden meanders on both sides of the driveway, from the entrance gate to the house, linking the native bayou habitat in the adjacent ravine and Rienzi's formal gardens. An overlook just inside the gate offers a good view of a ravine feeding Buffalo Bayou. This garden abounds with loblolly pines, holly ferns, cherry laurel and magnolia trees, and Japanese yews.

10. FOLLY GARDEN (Currently Off View)

A hidden treasure among Rienzi's gardens, the romantic Folly Garden lies beyond the Camellia Garden gate near Buffalo Bayou. The Folly Garden, so named for its reference to fanciful European garden outbuildings, resembles an old ruin. Garden figures and mottled columns imported by Harris Masterson from France dominate this secluded space.