

South Carolina

People & Places™

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO EXPLORING YOUR STATE



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Inside Pearl Fryar's Topiary World

Swooping, gently rounded topiaries—as shown here in the **St. John's Reformed Episcopal Church garden** in Charleston—appear across the state. On the following pages, Katie McElveen tells you where to see them. →

For a guy who just wanted to win Yard of the Month, Pearl Fryar has come a long, long way. Nearly 30 years later, he's an accomplished topiary artist whose garden in Bishopville is a pruned and snipped fantasy of shapes. He started it in the early 80s, coaxing shapes from masses of green—and, thank goodness, he never stopped the tireless pruning and the pampering. You're welcome to stroll his grounds, taking your time to see about 124 separate works there. Travel the state, too, to see a number of spots enhanced by his creative touch. Here's where to look.

Bishopville

Pearl has rightly been called an “ever-green surrealist.” His personal 3-acre yard, a cornfield when he bought it, is now filled with graceful archways, whimsical characters, gigantic abstract shapes, and hedges carved into intricate designs. One of his most popular pieces is the live oak that's happily growing as a giant cube. “I woke up one morning many years ago and decided I wanted a square tree,” he says with a grin. “Once I'd thought of it, it was just a matter of figuring out how to do it. It took me four years to accomplish.”

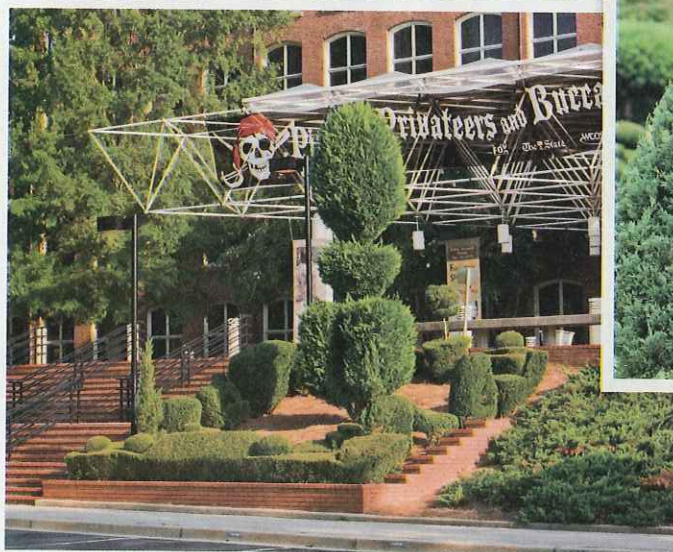
Pearl fashioned the funky sculptures set around the yard from salvaged appliance parts, old flowerpots, and scrap metal from the factory where he used to work. Among the many plants and trees he uses as canvas are balsam and Fraser firs, Leyland Cypress, and eight varieties of holly.

In downtown Bishopville, the two-block median and the Waffle House feature his signature topiaries. Pearl eats at Waffle House daily—for free, in exchange for adding the art.

MUST SEE: Two fishbone sculptures (one with a spiral that's still a work in progress) in his side yard. They're Pearl's first attempt at using juniper rather than cypress or holly.



His own garden in Bishopville



Columbia

It's hard not to notice Pearl's sculptures at the South Carolina State Museum. Standing like sentries on either side of a wide staircase, 20-foot-tall works sculpted from Leyland cypress feature stacks of circles, split rectangles, and egg-shaped orbs. Around them, ball-like shrubs sport portholes; mushroom

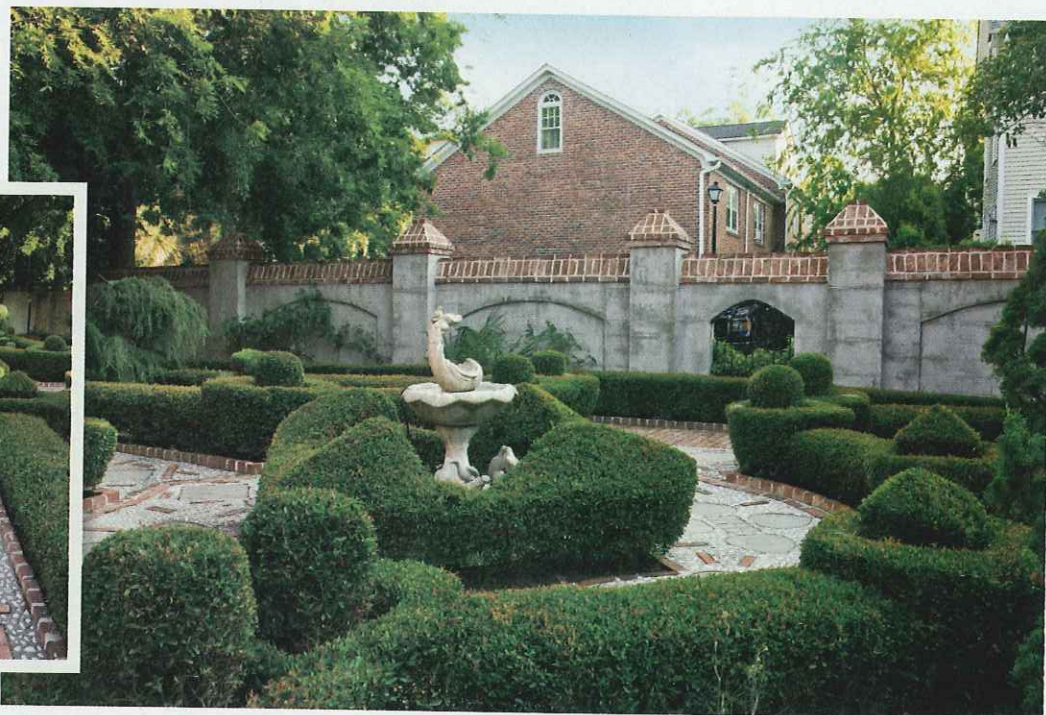
shapes, squares, and globes emerge from flat planes of the lush greenery. **MUST SEE:** Off to the side, a large juniper transformed into a mass of caterpillar-like squiggles. The effect is a swirl of foliage that's delicate yet substantial, like a sand castle that's been softened by a gentle wave. Pearl visits twice a year to prune and shape the plants to perfect form. ➔



ABOVE:
Working at home

LEFT: State Museum entry

BELOW AND RIGHT:
St. John's Reformed
Episcopal Church



Charleston

Beyond blacksmith Philip Simmons's intricate Heart Gates at St. John's Reformed Episcopal Church, Pearl repeated the heart motif to create a swirling wonderland in green. Here, stones embossed with hearts and

crosses lead to the fanciest concrete birdbath in the city. Throughout the walled space, trees carved into lush serpentines, sharp triangles, and perfect spheres show that nature can, in fact, be improved upon.

MUST SEE: The opening in the west

wall, cut at the request of neighbors, who wanted to watch the garden being constructed. Philip Simmons named the iron sculpture that fills the space Peninsula; in it, you'll find the rooftops of two Charleston single houses and fish swimming upstream.



Swoops and swirls at
Coker College

Hartsville

Several years ago, Pearl began working with art majors and Jean Grosser, head of the art department at Coker College, based here. Today, their collaborative Path Project includes a lavish hedge-rimmed fountain. The water feature is flanked by trees adorned with carefully shaped spirals of foliage climbing their sturdy trunks. Nearby, a stately procession of identical emerald arches bends over a footpath as it winds through the garden. The students also planned out a dramatic mosaic sculpture in shades of blue along with several other topiaries; Pearl executed their design to perfection.

HOW THE GARDEN TEACHES:

Coker students designed the topiaries that Pearl maintains on a regular basis. "Nurturing plants is similar to how Pearl nurtures creativity in the students," says Coker art professor Jean Grosser. "He teaches them how to solve problems." Pearl echoes that philosophy. "The moment you allow obstacles to determine where you're going," he says, "you're done." **MUST SEE:** The mosaic sculpture with the partially exposed "fishbone-patterned" metal frame. Pearl cast the sculpture himself, siting it among his green topiaries. *

See the Shapes

Visitors are welcome to visit Pearl Fryar's Bishopville garden from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. All other sites are also open to the public at no charge.
pearlfryar.com

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