

Kent, the True Garden of England



Whether you come for an event – al fresco theatre and concerts are spellbinding – or simply to revel in celebrated designs and beauty, you'll find Kent is the True Garden of England.

It's no coincidence that Henry VIII praised Kent as the Garden of England after tucking into a bowl of juicy local cherries. Both before and since, the county's rich soils and friendly climate have inspired the creation of the most enchanting escapes, and today you can visit 180-plus gardens: from magical castle to plantsman's paradise, coastal surprise to Himalayan adventure, with all-season scents and colours that captivate the senses.

Day 1: Farmhouse garden to castle

Begin a day of colourful contrasts at **Kent Life**, Sandling near Maidstone, with a stroll through local fruit, farming and hop heritage. Nose around the farmhouse gardens (complete with traditional pigsty) to see how the fruit and veg are doing, wander apple orchards and the aromatic, ornamental herb garden. It's said Kent grew the first-ever hop garden, in 1524, and here you can tour the very last one to be hand-picked in Britain, as well as see the country's last working coal-fired oast house. Try hop picking yourself, at the annual Hops 'n' Harvest Festival. www.kentlife.org.uk

Tuck into homemade cake and coffee at 1950s-themed Dotty's Tea Room. Or head on to Leeds Castle, Maidstone, for lunch in the Fairfax Hall Restaurant with spectacular views over the moat.

An early glimpse of **Leeds Castle** from the beautiful Cascade Garden sets the mood for a captivating roam through 900 years of history, royal indulgence and romance. Lose yourself in the Wood Garden where the spring theatre of daffodils and narcissi is followed by splendid azaleas and rhododendrons. Then immerse yourself in the English cottage charm of the Culpeper Garden, awash with the colours and scents of roses, lupins, poppies and lads' love. The Lady Baillie Garden takes a turn to the Mediterranean and, if you fancy some light-hearted fun, give the spiralling yew maze and grotto a whirl. www.leeds-castle.com

Day 2: Finest fruits & Edwardian magic

Brogdale, Home of the National Fruit Collection at Faversham is a temptation for the tastebuds and a feast for the eyes. A living gene bank of more than 4,000 varieties of apples, pears, plums, cherries, cobnuts, currants and quinces, it's simply the biggest and best collection of fruit trees anywhere in the world.

Take a self-guided walk or join orchard tours to hear the fascinating stories behind different fruits, and return again and again for festivals through the year: from April blossoms to strawberries and cherries, artisan cider and autumn apples. Maybe treat yourself to apple pie – this is Brogdale after all – in The Courtyard Café. www.brogdalecollections.org

Then have a complete change of pace at nearby **Mount Ephraim Gardens**, a soothing escape that is pure balm to the soul. Mount Ephraim has been home to the Dawes family for over 300 years and ten acres of Edwardian terraced gardens recall a gentler age, with a truly personal touch. Enjoy the spring colours and scents of rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias, and the seductive Millennium Rose Garden in mid-summer; the ‘Miz Maze’ of dancing ornamental grasses and wild flowers in late summer is unique. While away a lazy half-hour in the Edwardian Tea Room overlooking intriguing topiary. www.mountephraingardens.co.uk

Day 3: Hidden gem to secret ornamental gardens

“Expect the unexpected in this hidden gem” is the invitation to **Quex House and Gardens**, Birchington, and the Regency home and its extensive gardens live up to the billing. Share a passion for outdoor space cultivated by generations of the Powell-Cotton family, in seven acres of historic gardens and natural woodland enhanced by Victorian layout and landscaping. Lawns, herbaceous borders, shrubs, exotic trees, ponds and statues all entice, as well as a lovely Victorian Walled Garden, greenhouses and rare cucumber pit. Relax with a picnic or savour lunch and garden views from the patios of Mama Feelgoods Boutique Café. www.quexpark.co.uk

South along the coast **The Secret Gardens of Sandwich**, encircled by the old city walls, were created by Sir Edwin Lutyens with the help of Gertrude Jekyll in the early 20th century. Dramatically rescued by the current owners from years of neglect, the 3.5-acre ornamental gardens display many characteristics of the iconic English Country Garden style made famous by the Edwardian duo – brick paths, herbaceous borders planted with lilies, lupins and lavenders, and garden ‘rooms’ of varying character – combined with more modern features like the Tropical Border with rare Wollemi Pine. You can stay in the Lutyens-designed manor house and there are delicious cream teas to be had in the tearoom in the shade of lime trees. www.the-salutation.com

Day 4: A coastal surprise and the best garden view

Blasted by salty winds from the English Channel, **Walmer Castle** would seem an unpromising spot for a garden, but thanks to the enthusiasm of several Lords Warden – the Tudor castle is their official residence – and the shelter of sturdy walls, the grounds flourish with diverse plants. Be enchanted by richly scented magnolia trees growing in the dry moat, plentiful fruit, veg and flowers in the Kitchen Garden, the quiet pool and sculptural plants (purple-headed cardoons, blue agapanthus, purple verbena) of The Queen Mother’s Garden – she was Lord Warden 1978–2002. The Broadwalk with cloud yew hedges and massed plantings of mature trees are truly striking. Sample produce from the organic kitchen gardens in the Lord Warden’s Tea Room. www.english-heritage.org.uk

Afterwards, meander a few miles inland to **Goodnestone Park Gardens**, Ashford, a regular haunt of Jane Austen whose brother married the daughter of the house. Generations of the FitzWalter family have created the gardens you see today and the view to the church tower through the succession of enclosures in the Walled Garden is acclaimed among the best in any English garden. Relish it as you saunter through the old-fashioned rose garden, to the rill garden and kitchen garden, and savour ‘hidden secrets’ like the now-huge

wisterias and alpine garden. Goodnestone Park boasts some outstanding old trees and woodland walks are a delight from spring to autumn. www.goodnestoneparkgardens.co.uk

Day 5: Grape expectations & delphiniums

If it's not too early in the day for you, raise a toast to the renaissance of English wines, at one of Kent's award-winning vineyards. Local soils, climate and know-how create ideal conditions for top tipples.

Biddenden Vineyards is the county's oldest commercial vineyard, established by the Barnes family in 1969, and **Chapel Down Winery and Vineyard** at Tenterden supplied refreshment for the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. Go on tours and tastings with the experts at either vineyard to learn about growing flavour-packed grapes and winemaking methods. Will it be red, white, rosé or sparkling wine to take home? www.biddendenvineyards.com www.chapeldown.com

Spend your afternoon at **Godinton House & Gardens**, Ashford, where summer delphiniums are a spectacular treat. There's much more, of course. Twelve acres of gardens around this beloved Jacobean home feature terraced lawns bordered by a famous yew hedge and topiaried box, curvy-edged herbaceous borders and ornamental tree and shrub plantings. Look out for drifts of daffodils in the wild garden, Japanese wisteria tumbling in a waterfall of lavender flowers in the Italian garden (May) and voluptuous summer-long flowering in the rose garden. Stretch your legs around the 18th-century park before testing the delicious homemade cakes in the tearooms. Groups welcome Monday – Thursday.

www.godintonhouse.co.uk

Day 6: Tree heaven to Himalayan adventure

There's something about the scale and drama of trees that puts life into perspective and no more so than in the towering world of **Bedgebury National Pinetum & Forest**, near Goudhurst. Escape, seclusion, earthy smells, gentle rustlings – a genuine place to unwind. The 320-acre pinetum grows over 12,000 trees and shrubs (including 1,800 different species) from across five continents, many of them rare and endangered, and while the majority are evergreen, there's plenty of seasonal change: flowering tulip trees in spring, resinous summer scents of pine and heather, golden larch in autumn, and conifers freshly frosted into winter sculptures. A peaceful picnic, or soup and scrummy cakes in the Bedgebury Cafe?

www.forestry.gov.uk/bedgebury

The sense of adventure continues at **Riverhill Himalayan Gardens**, near Sevenoaks, an historic hillside garden first planted in the 1840s and nurtured by six generations of the Rogers family. A star of Channel 4's *Country House Rescue*, this imaginative, explorers' delight leaps with hide-and-seek interest in the Wood Garden and you'll find wonderful vistas of the Weald if you climb to Little Everest Viewpoint. Learn about plants brought back from the Himalayas, admire rare rhododendrons and fine specimen trees, and spot the oak grown from an acorn brought home from the Crimean War. Family fun, picnics and Riverhill are the perfect combination. www.riverhillgardens.co.uk

Day 7: Glorious garden rooms & romantic escape

Embark on a day of pure enchantment, beginning at **Penshurst Place and Gardens**, Penshurst, where horticultural records date back to 1346. Since 1552 the fortified manor house has been home to the Sidney family and the glorious 11-acre formal walled garden was originally laid out in 1580. Wander a series of spellbinding 'rooms', divided by more than a mile of yew hedging: including the Magnolia Garden, Grey and

White Garden, and Union Flag Garden dazzling with summer roses and lavender. The fabulous new Jubilee Walk, restoring the famed double herbaceous borders, is among the latest creative developments. Penshurst's celebrated apples are put to tasty use in the Garden Restaurant – try Lady De L'Isle's apple cake. www.penshurstplace.com

Just a short drive away, double-moated 13th-century **Hever Castle**, Edenbridge, one-time home of Anne Boleyn, is complimented by the most romantic gardens. Hard to believe, but this was marshland before the gardens were laid out between 1904 and 1908! The Italian Garden is a magnificent highlight, created to display then-owner William Waldorf Astor's collection of Italian sculpture. Breathe in the heady fragrances of more than 4,000 flowers in the Rose Garden – the Hever Rose, producing masses of velvety deep-red blooms, flowers May–October. Water features, like the recent Millennium Fountain on Sixteen Acre Island, sparkle and soothe spirits, and there's wonderful woodland walking. How about afternoon tea in the Guthrie Pavilion Café gazing over the lake? www.hevercastle.co.uk

Day 8: A plantsman's paradise & Darwin's outdoor lab

The last day of our tour starts in characterful manner at the seven-acre plantsman's paradise of **Great Comp**, near Sevenoaks, created from 1957 by Roderick and Joy Cameron. If you're sweet on salvias, this is for you, as the unusual, long-flowering plants put on a great show from May to October. New introductions, from Great Comp's long-term breeding programme and a network of fellow 'Salvia Nutters', keep displays fresh, and there's plenty of additional eye-catching interest framing the 17th-century manor house: from early snowflakes and hellebores to magnolias, azaleas, rhododendrons, and rare and exotic shrubs. www.greatcomparden.co.uk

After coffee or lunch in Great Comp's Old Dairy Tearoom, set course for the **Home of Charles Darwin, Down House**, at Downe, and a most unusual finale. It was here that the famous scientist wrote *On the Origin of Species*, using the extensive gardens as an outdoor lab for his groundbreaking ideas on evolution and natural selection. Explore the Sandwalk – Darwin's 'thinking path' where he strolled and reflected – and view his beloved greenhouses featuring carnivorous plants and exotic orchids: here he made revolutionary discoveries on the reproductive behaviour of plants. Twelve of his experiments have been recreated in the garden, including one with weeds that influenced his radical theories on the struggle for existence and evolution. You'll never approach gardening in the same way again! www.english-heritage.org.uk

For more glorious gardens and seasonal inspiration see www.visitkent.co.uk/trade