

Kent, the Garden of England *Enrich your senses!*

Dazzling colours, seductive scents, superb seasonal shows – Kent's gardens are rightly world renowned. And with 180-plus to choose from, there's one to match your every mood and interest: grand and historic, exotic and informal, innovative vistas in the making like the World Garden of Plants. Excite or soothe your senses on a genuinely revitalising escape (and pick up brilliant ideas for your own garden from celebrated designers across the ages).

Goodnestone Park, near Canterbury

Follow Jane Austen to this surprising haven of tranquillity hidden away in southeast Kent – the author was a frequent visitor to the family home of her sister-in-law. The walled garden is resplendent with clematis, jasmine and roses, and many admirers believe the view through a succession of enclosures to the church tower is one of the best in any English garden. See what you think. Then amble 14 acres of 18th-century parkland studded with rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias.

Hever Castle, near Edenbridge

The magic of the 13th-century double-moated castle where Henry VIII romanced Anne Boleyn is matched by spellbinding gardens, including Rose, Tudor and Italian. The latter, without equal in Britain, was laid out in the early 20th century for then owner William Waldorf Astor, to display his outstanding collection of sculptures and statuary dating from Roman to Renaissance times. Wander Anne Boleyn's Walk beneath fine old trees, picnic by the lake, and don't miss the unique 'water' maze (April-October, weather permitting).

Penshurst Place and Gardens, near Tonbridge

Get to the early roots of our horticultural traditions in Penshurst's 11-acre formal walled garden, whose records date back to 1346. The ancestral estate of Viscount De L'Isle is a beautiful blend of ancient parkland with intimate garden 'rooms' close to the medieval house, including the Italian, Rose, Nut and quirky Union Flag Garden planted with lavender and roses. All-season interest ranges from spring daffodils and bluebells to golden and red apples in autumn.

Scotney Castle Garden, Lamberhurst

This is pure fairytale! Created in the 1830s by Edward Hussey, in 'Picturesque' style around the ruins of a small 14th-century moated castle, Scotney is a place to escape and dream. In May-June it is ablaze with rhododendrons and azaleas, in full summer roses and wisteria ramble over the ruins, and in autumn trees and ferns light up the scene with warm colour. Delight in the ever-changing vistas provided by winding paths, parkland and woodland. (National Trust.)

Sissinghurst Castle Garden, near Cranbrook

One of the world's most celebrated gardens inspires no matter how many times you visit, with its bewitching play of colours and mood. The creation of writer Vita Sackville-West and her husband Sir Harold Nicolson, it surrounds the surviving parts of an Elizabethan mansion in a series of small compartments – among them, the iconic White Garden which certainly cools your senses after the abundance of 'hot' colours elsewhere. The Rose Garden in midsummer is packed with intoxicating, old-fashioned shrub varieties. Sissinghurst is most tranquil after 3pm. (National Trust.)

Emmetts Garden, near Sevenoaks

When best to visit this charming Victorian garden? In spring for enticing bluebell woods, in summer for rich displays of roses, in autumn for glorious leaf and berry colour. All year, the views over the Weald are wonderful. Influenced by William Robinson, Emmetts is relaxed and informal, with many rare trees and shrubs from across the world. You'll also find the highest treetop in Kent here!

Walmer Castle and Gardens, Walmer

How times change! This Tudor fort is now the elegant country residence of the Lords Warden of the Cinque Ports, who have included the late Queen Mother. Star attraction is the magnificent Queen Mother's Garden, designed by Penelope Hobhouse and given to Her Majesty on her 95th birthday. The grassed-over moat hosts a variety of flowers and you can explore a woodland walk, working kitchen garden and double herbaceous border flanked by mature yew hedges.

Lullingstone Castle, Eynsford

If you've been enthralled by the BBC 2 TV series *Save Lullingstone Castle*, then the UK's first-ever World Garden of Plants currently being established in two acres here needs no introduction. The brainchild of plant hunter Tom Hart Dyke, whose ancestors have lived at Lullingstone since the 15th century, it will eventually feature 10,000 different species from around the globe. Almost 80% of the plants we commonly grow are not native to Britain – at Lullingstone you'll be able to follow them to their origins. Visit once, visit several times and be part of this exciting ongoing project.

Mount Ephraim, near Faversham

Indulge in some aromatherapy for the soul as you drift along terraces of fragrant roses in this enchanting nine-acre Edwardian garden. There's a small lake and woodland area with pleasant views to surrounding orchards. An extensive collection of shrubs and trees plus a rock garden will keep you fascinated – or for some lighthearted fun puzzle your way around the new 'mizmaze' flanked by ornamental grasses and herbaceous perennials.

Nurseries, orchards, vineyards

Kent's fertile soil provides just the right conditions for plants and fruit to flourish, hence the county's fame for orchards and vineyards – and Kent is leading the way in the renaissance of English wines. Tours, tips and tastings make for memorable days out. For example:

Brogdale, near Faversham, is home to The National Fruit Collections, including over 2,300 different varieties of apple, 550 of pear, 350 of plum, and 320 of cherry (we didn't know there were so many!). No need to feel baffled, there's plenty of plant advice if you want to buy something to take home.

Meanwhile, a guided tour of **Chapel Down Winery at Tenterden Vineyard** lets you in on the secrets of viticulture – and you can judge the results for yourself in the shop.

Or maybe you want to stick with flowers, perhaps with an expedition to **Dowderry Nursery**, Hadlow. Deep breath and relax as you follow your nose around aromatic displays of 150-plus lavenders and 30 types of rosemary. Sensational.

To find out more about a wide range of beautiful gardens in Kent visit www.visitkent.co.uk