

Great garden getaways

One of spring's greatest pleasures is a stroll around a beautiful garden. In a *Choice* special report, James Henry highlights some of the best to visit

MAY IS a magical time to visit a garden as the season gently moves from spring into summer. Daffodils and narcissus are overtaken by tulips and bluebells and camellias and magnolias give way to the bright colours of rhododendrons and azaleas.

Given a spot of sunshine, there can be few pleasures better than a stroll around a May garden to find a bench in a leafy glade.

Of course, gardens today usually have excellent catering so you can cap your visit with a cuppa and a slice of cake – heaven.

If the idea appeals, here are a few gardens that come highly recommended.

Exbury Gardens

Exbury Gardens near Beaulieu in the New Forest were the inspiration of Lionel Nathan de Rothschild. It was his vision, his dedication and his resources that created one of the finest woodland gardens in the country.

A visitor once described Exbury as "Heaven with the gates open". It is a garden with botanical rarities and masses of spectacular colour.

Lionel de Rothschild was a keen collector of plants, particularly rhododendrons and azaleas. He was also a highly successful hybridiser of many different species, and Exbury is still filled with his creations. This tradition has been continued by his descendants, his sons Edmund and Leopold and grandsons Nicholas and Lionel, who actively continue to develop the gardens to this day.

Both Edmund, who died in 2009 aged 93, and Lionel were awarded the highest possible honour by the RHS in recognition of their horticultural achievements – the Victoria Medal of Honour. Father and son were described as "bankers by hobby, and gardeners by profession" and their Exbury legacy is today enjoyed by an annual 100,000-plus visitors from all corners of the world.

■ Exbury Gardens and Steam Railway opens daily until November 8, from 10am to 4.30pm. Website: (www.exbury.co.uk), tel: 023 8089 1203. Exbury Gardens are in the New Forest, near Beaulieu, 20 minutes from junction 2 of the M27. The gardens' postcode is SO45 1AZ.



Beth Chatto

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The Beth Chatto Gardens began in 1960. From an overgrown wasteland of brambles, parched gravel and boggy ditches near Colchester in Essex, it has been transformed using plants adapted by nature to thrive in different conditions.

The accompanying plant nursery stocks more than 2000 plants, all sold according to growing conditions.

Beth Chatto was born in 1923 to enthusiastic gardening parents. After working as a teacher she married the late Andrew Chatto in 1943. His lifelong interest in the origins of plants influenced the development of the gardens and the use of plants to this day.

The Gardens and Nursery cover roughly seven acres, open all year round, including bank holidays but closed for two weeks over Christmas and New Year.

■ Opening hours for the Gardens, Nursery and Tea Rooms are: March to October, Monday to Saturday 9am to 5pm, Sunday 10am to 5pm; October to February, Monday to Saturday 9am to 4pm, Sunday 10am to 4pm.

Admission to the gardens is £6.95 (under-14s free). Winter admission to the gardens is £4 (October to February).

■ The Nursery, Gravel Garden and Tea Room can be visited without buying a ticket to the main gardens.

■ The gardens are on the A133, four miles east of Colchester and a quarter of a mile east of Elmstead Market. Follow the brown tourist signs. For satnav the Postcode is CO7 7DB.

Website: (www.bethchatto.co.uk), tel: 01206 822007.



Penshurst Place

Majestically surrounding the house, more than a mile of yew hedging divides the garden into a series of 'rooms', each with its own season and colour.

You can venture further afield and visit the Arboretum, Trout Lakes, Lake Park and Lancup Well. At around 50 acres, they make Penshurst Place and Gardens an alluring and seductive spectacle throughout the year.

Penshurst Place, on the Weald of Kent near Tonbridge, has a rich history, being owned by a series of Dukes and other aristocrats until Henry VIII took it from the Duke of Buckingham and used it as a hunting lodge. Eventually it was given by Edward VI to the Sidney family and it remains in that family today.

Part of the recent BBC TV series *Wolf Hall* was filmed at Penshurst Place.

The gardens are as old as the house, with records dating back to 1346 and the formal gardens being laid out in Elizabethan times. There are some 11 acres of walled gardens divided by those yew hedges.

Planting ensures there is colour and interest right through the seasons.

■ The house and gardens are open daily until November 2. For opening hours and prices visit: (www.penshurstplace.com), tel: 01892 870307.



Penshurst Place



High Beeches

High Beeches Garden has a magnificent collection of rare and unusual shrubs and trees from around the world, dating back more than a century.

Collected by famous plant hunters such as Ernest Wilson and Frank Kingdom Ward, many are of significant historical importance. The 27-acre gardens also feature the National Collection of Stewartia Trees and one of Sussex's ancient acid wildflower meadows.

At this time of year the gardens are making the transition from camellias and magnificent magnolias that grow amid hosts of daffodils to the early summer glades carpeted with swathes of native bluebells and surrounded by the colour and fragrance of azaleas and rhododendrons. The sumptuous Rhododendron Loderi are at their best.

The unique and ancient acid wildflower meadow is alive with butterflies and buzzing with insects in June. The fine old Stewartias will be in flower then. The meadow is a Site of Nature Conservation Importance, one of over 300 in West Sussex. There are 11 plants which are indicators of ancient meadow land, all of which are to be found at High Beeches: Sweet Vernal-grass, Red Clover, Ribwort Plantain, Red fescue, Crested Dog's Tail, Red Fescue, Cock'sFoot, Yorkshire Fog, White Clover, Bird's-foot-trefoil, Common Bent and Common Knapweed.

■ High Beeches is half a mile east of Handcross on the B2110 in mid-Sussex. It is open daily except for Wednesdays until November 1 from 1 to 5pm. Admission is £7, children under 14 free. Website: (www.highbeeches.com), tel: 01444 400589.

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