



Great Gardens of Southern England

Horticulture historical and contemporary

3–10 June 2026 (MM 979)

£3,940 • 8 days

Speaker: Louisa Allen

Fourteen gardens, selected for excellence of planting and design, variety and range, character and atmosphere.

Leisurely pace, not more than two gardens a day, and free time for independent wandering.

The local gardener talks at many of the places, supplementing the commentary by the lecturer who accompanies the tour throughout.

Two comfortable hotels.

It could be said that a list of the finest gardens in southern England would not be dissimilar from a list of the finest gardens in the world, but perhaps that would be excessively jingoistic. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that climate, topography, botanical knowledge, design capability and (historically) material wealth converge in the region to enable a horticultural experience as rich as could be found anywhere.

The re-creation, informed by horticultural archaeology, of the Privy Garden at Hampton Court Palace to its state in 1701 is exemplary. An even earlier period is visible in the gardens at Penshurst Place where relative indigence in later centuries precluded sweeping away the 1560s scheme in favour of a fashionable landscaped park.

And, contrariwise, being England, a recurring feature is the high quality of modern design and plantsmanship. Different choices have been made in different places about the balance between maintaining the historic and planting afresh, while in some cases parcels of under-used land have been appropriated to create something entirely new.

The gardening revolution around the turn of the 19th century, when informality and rustic charm became favoured, has left its impact on many of the gardens. Sometimes this romantic disorderliness is constrained by a grid of walls – masonry or botanic – to create a series of ‘rooms’; Sissinghurst is the best-known example, others are at Arundel and Nymans.

Allied with this movement was a desire to celebrate native species, in contrast to the Victorian passion for plant hunting across the world which filled gardens with exotics and rarities. Exbury and Borde Hill are prime instances of the latter.



Arundel Castle, watercolour by C.H. Ashdown, publ. 1911.

The dedication and learning of the creators of these gardens, both the owners and the professional gardeners they hired, are causes for wonder. It helped to have money, and foreigners who chose to make England their home constitute a fascinating subset of horticultural entrepreneur, Lionel Rothschild, Ludwig Messel and William Waldorf Astor (Exbury, Nymans and Hever Castle) being prominent here.

Many of these gardens are still in the family of the founder; others are expertly tended by trusts set up for the purpose; four are now in the hands of the National Trust.

Itinerary

Day 1: Hampton Court. The coach leaves central London at 10.00am. Hampton Court Palace is a peerless early-Tudor, late-Stuart royal residence which is surrounded by some exceptional historical gardens: the formal canals dating to 1670, the Privy Garden recreated in its 1701 iteration with evergreen cones and spheres and seasonal flowers, colourful sunken gardens with ponds, extensive rose garden, even larger kitchen garden and the world's largest vine. Continue to the outskirts of Winchester where two nights are spent.

Day 2: Exbury, Mottisfont. Two gardens today with collections of international importance. Drive through the New Forest to Exbury

Gardens, the creation from 1919 of Lionel Rothschild, ‘banker by hobby but gardener by profession’. The scale is astonishing, with 200 acres of rare and magnificent trees, but it is for the rhododendrons and azaleas that it is famous. The walled gardens of Mottisfont Abbey shelter the national collection of Old English roses, for which Graham Stuart Thomas scoured the country in the decades after the War.

Day 3: Arundel, Parham. Medieval and Victorian, Arundel Castle is an impressive backdrop to lawns, sylvan groves and formal gardens. The Collector Earl's Garden designed in 2008 by Isabel and Julien Bannerman is a witty interpretation of a what might have been created by the 17th-cent. connoisseur Earl, with waterworks and Italianate architecture. Parham House is a privately owned Elizabethan mansion with horticultural delights of the highest order in a sequence of walled gardens. First of five nights in Tunbridge Wells.

Day 4: Charleston, Borde Hill. In Charleston Farmhouse almost every surface is decorated by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, whose country residence it was. The garden was redesigned in 1918 by their close friend and art critic, Roger Fry. The Stephenson Clarke family has lived at Borde Hill since 1893 and continues to tend and develop an exquisite series of garden rooms, periodically bringing in leading

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continued

designers. Beguilingly beautiful rose garden by Robin Williams, well named Paradise Walk, peaceful Italian Garden, dells with exotica, all loosely linked by lawns and woodland walks.

Day 5: Scotney Castle, Great Dixter. At Scotney Castle, the theorist of the Picturesque, William Sawrey Gilpin, melded the medieval ruins, Jacobean mansion, quarry, pond and planting into a truly Romantic vision. Largely the creation of garden writer Christopher Lloyd, Great Dixter is a bewitchingly original and abundant horticultural phenomenon. The shrill juxtapositions of hues are particularly memorable and the density of planting is extraordinary, bulging to block paths and rising to overtop the tallest visitor.

Day 6: Hever, Penshurst. Hever Castle was home to two of Henry VIII's wives, while the gardens were made for William Waldorf Astor from 1903. The scale is breathtaking: a thousand men laboured for four years to create a 35-acre lake, 4-acre Italian Garden, topiary, valley garden, Tudor garden and to plant numerous noble trees. Dating to 1560, the enchanting series of walled gardens at Penshurst Place have great historical importance, while the modern iteration has a variety of characters and moods.

Day 7: Pashley, Sissinghurst. Not particularly large, Pashley Manor nevertheless has rich variety of terrain, layout and planting, with inspired juxtapositions of flowers and colours. An utter delight. Created by Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West after 1930, Sissinghurst is the most famous of all English gardens. Embodying 'the strictest formality of design with the maximum informality of planting', brick walls and yew hedges create a series of sharply differentiated compartments, none more lovely (or renowned) than the White Garden.

Day 8: Nymans. Ludwig Messel bought Nymans in 1890 and with head gardener James Comber created one of the great gardens of the world. Wonder follows wonder, surprise succeeds surprise, from the pinetum to the rose garden, sumptuous borders of annuals to rock and heath gardens. The tour finishes before 3.00pm at Gatwick Airport Railway Station from where there are frequent trains to several stations in London (30–40 mins) and elsewhere.

Note that appointments for some visits cannot be confirmed until January 2026.

Lecturer

Louisa Allen. Louisa is a horticulturist and garden designer. She worked for the City of London Corporation from 2012–2017, managing 200 modern and historic green spaces in the Square Mile, where notable recent projects included commissioning Professor Nigel Dunnett's landmark planting scheme on the Barbican Estate, re-landscaping St Dunstan in the East and renovating Postman's Park. She completed a Masters in Horticulture with the Royal Horticultural Society in 2016. Her particular interest is urban environments and the impact these can have on well-being and engaging communities.

Practicalities

Price. Two sharing: £3,940 . **Single occupancy:** £4,840.

Included: hotel accommodation as described below; travel by private coach; all breakfasts and five dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admission charges; all tips, all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager; tours with the site gardener at some places.

Accommodation. Lainston House Hotel, near Winchester (exclusive.co.uk/lainston-house/): set in gardens and 63 acres of parkland on the outskirts of Winchester, the décor of the public areas – bar, lounge, restaurant – maintain a country house feel. **Hotel du Vin, Tunbridge Wells**, (hotelduvin.com): a 4-star, 18th-cent. hotel located in the city centre. Being in the city-centre in a historic property, rooms vary in size and outlook. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? A good level of fitness is essential as unavoidably a lot of walking is involved, some of it on sloping or uneven ground. Many of the gardens are large, and on some days up to 3 or 4 miles may be covered. Average distance by coach per day: 56 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.