

CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW

10 nights

Email jenny@britholidays.com for dates and pricing

England is a land of gardens. From the tiniest of terrace houses to the grandest of Stately Homes, the British tend their gardens with love and affection.

Our Garden and Great Houses tours include a selection of some of the finest formal and planned gardens dating from the 16th century onward. We also see award-winning modern creations, and gardens that perhaps don't receive the praise they should (like those in the photography above).



In addition to magnificent gardens, we also include a range of Stately and other great houses and homes. You can choose from one of three tours; one featuring the county of Kent, another in the southern counties of Wiltshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, or one combining all.

Our Kent portion concentrates on some of the more classic and better known sites while our Hampshire and Isle of Wight section introduces you to a range off the main tourist path, but exquisite in their own way.

Further, each tour has the added distinction of including one of the Royal Horticultural Society prize shows - the well-established Chelsea Flower Show. Finally, we also include visits to some London Homes and gardens, 'a String of Pearls', that are often passed by but are jewels not to be missed.

TENTATIVE ITINERARY

NIGHTSTOP

DAY ONE

Wisley RHS, Chartwell (with Nymans a possibility)

Our 2007 tour begins with two of the most popular and iconic of England's homes and gardens. Does Winston Churchill's home of Chartwell require an introduction? What makes it such a memorable visit is not only the view from the garden (that inspired his painting) but the fact that the interior is almost as he left it. You can almost smell the cigars. And Wisley, of course, equally requires only a brief introduction as this famed centre for the Royal Horticultural Society is known the world over.

If there's time then our last stop of the day will be at Nymans, one of the great gardens of the Sussex Weald. The 30 acre garden was created over nearly three-quarters of a century from 1885 by Ludwig Messel and his son Leonard. During this time they assembled a remarkable collection of trees, shrubs and plants from all over the world. However, they ensured that the garden retained its intimate charm and it is the combination of the rare and exotic with a simple and friendly garden that is so remarkable. Sevenoaks

DAY TWO

Ightham Mote, Knole, Scotney Castle

Ightham Mote, deservedly one of the most popular small gardens in the region. Here you can explore 650 years of history in the most complete examples of a mediaeval moated manor house.

Scotney Castle has been termed England's most romantic garden with Victorian terraces covered in a riot of coloured shrubs overlooking a 14th century moated castle.

The garden is set on the side of a valley at 500 feet but is sheltered by the magnificent woods of the Sussex Weald.

Finally, we finish with a climatic finish to our first day with a visit to Knole. This is one of England great 'treasure houses'. Home of the Lords Sackville since 1603, the property has much to offer including Royal Stuart furnishings and a fine art collection of English masters. Knole was the birthplace of Vita Sackville-West (whose own garden creation we'll see later) and was used by Virginia Woolf as the setting for her novel 'Orlando'. A visit here is like stepping back in time. Sevenoaks

DAY THREE

Groombridge Place, Hever Castle, Sissinghurst

We travel a short distance to the fabulous Sissinghurst Castle. Vita Sackville-West's world famous garden is another that requires no introduction to garden enthusiasts. You'll have plenty of time to explore this intimate and intricate garden and to visit those parts of her home open to the public

Hever Castle is the jewel in our day. Hever is many people's idea of what a 'real' castle should look like, from its gateway and courtyard to its surrounding moat. It is the most fairy-tale like. Though dating back to 1270, and being the family home of one of Henry VIII's ill-fated wives (Anne Boleyn), it also has a relatively contemporary feel provided by the Astors who took over and restored the castle in the early part of last century. With a 30-acre garden including a unique Italian garden filled with roses and statues, there's plenty to admire here.

Our final garden today will be Groombridge. This has the added attraction of an attached house and Sherlock Holmes fans will enjoy discovering the connection here to the great detective. We also need to leave some flexibility for 'serendipity' today as we'll no doubt find some attraction en route that is unplanned but which we simply must stop for. Well, it wouldn't be a Back-Roads tour if that didn't happen! Sevenoaks

DAY FOUR

Bodiam, Great Dixter, local informal gardens and your choice!

On a Back-Roads Touring Co. tour we like to leave room for adaptation; adaptation to the weather, the local conditions, and most importantly, adaptation to the desires of tour participants. Thus, on today's programme we'll leave space for you, in consultation with the guide to decide on at least one visit. This region is blessed with homes and gardens; Penshurst Place, Leonardslee, Pashley Manor and Emmetts, to name but a few that have wonderful qualities. This morning the choice will be yours.

Another iconic garden and house is that of Great Dixter. This is the largest half-timbered house in England but it's the garden that really grabs the attention with its topiary, wild meadows and famed Long Border. It is one that cannot be missed.

We've an opportunity of a slight change of pace and period for today's final visits. You'll have the choice of seeing the magnificently preserved 15th century Bodiam Castle, the Abbey connected with the famed 1066 Battle of Hastings or, perhaps, Kipling's house, Bateman's. Dinner is not included tonight to allow some flexibility for attending London theatre. London

DAY FIVE

Chiswick House, Ham House, Kew

Our London day concentrates on some of the gardens and stately homes that run along the banks of the Thames to the west of the city like a string of pearls.

Robert Adams 'Osterly Park', Gunnesbury House, the municipal gardens of Walpole House in Ealing are all deserving of attention but supreme amongst them is Syon House with its Tudor connections and National Trust arboretum.

A short distance away, close to Marble Hill House and under the watchful eye of Richmond Hill, sits Ham House. This magnificent 16th century pile boasts of the last formal Dutch gardens. Our method of reaching the house, by rowed ferry across the Thames adds a special dimension to the visit!

Last, but certainly not least on our day is the Royal Botanic Gardens of Kew.

Dinner tonight will be taken in an historic Thames riverside pub. London

DAY SIX

Chelsea Flower Show

The World famous CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW is our central feature of the day. There's an afternoon option to visit Chiswick House for those who don't want the whole day at Chelsea. Chiswick is a pleasant garden and 'party' home created by Lord Burlington and architect Inigo Jones at Chiswick. This public, neighborhood space delights all visitors with its informality and its well-tended and colorful flower beds.

Dinner is not included on the tour this evening to give flexibility to those who wish to stay as long as is possible at the Chelsea Flower Show. London

DAY SEVEN

The Rothschild's Waddesden Manor, hidden villages of the Chiltern Hills and Cliveden.

Today we visit a region of the UK that can truly be described as 'unrecognized'. Perhaps we could even use the phrase, 'the UK's hidden secret' without it being just the tired old cliché. The Chiltern Hills are a supreme delight.

In this smallish area of gentle hills and sudden valleys, we find impossibly pretty villages. Some might be recognisable from popular films and BBC TV shows but it's a surprise to find they are real not just sets. Amongst the gems to discover are the 'Marharishi's Well', an Indian Prince's garden gift, the Astor's magnificent country gardens at Cliveden, and the Rothschild's sumptuous, Loire chateau-like, Waddesdon Manor.

Add to this some stunning private gardens, picturesque parish churchyards, a memorable retail 'garden centre' and a 1000 year old pub for lunch, and you have an exquisite and unique day.

Dinner is not included this evening to allow flexibility for those wanting to attend theatre, walk besides the nearby Thames, or perhaps enjoy Chiswick, this very English of neighbourhoods. London

DAY EIGHT

Southside House & Hatchlands or Claredon or Polesdon Lacey

Our first visit of the day is a very special one; to a home described by connoisseurs as an unforgettable experience, Southside House provides an enchantingly eccentric backdrop to the lives and loves of generations of the Pennington Mellor Munthe families. Maintained in traditional style without intrusive refurbishment and crowded with the family possessions of centuries, Southside offers a wealth of fascinating family stories and associations with Queen Natalie of Serbia and her son Alexander, Nelson's Lady Hamilton and others. Our visit has that special touch in that we have 'family connections'!

Polesden Lacey, our next stop, represents the Regency period (1820s) in our historical panorama. Sumptuous? Certainly sumptuous enough to have attracted King George VI and wife Elizabeth (our beloved and much missed Queen Mother) to spend part of their honeymoon here. In addition to the magnificent interior, there's the lovely walled rose garden to walk through.

Finally, we'll look at Hinton Ampner. This is one of the great gardens of the 20th-century. It is a masterpiece of design by Ralph Dutton, 8th and last Lord Sherborne, uniting a formal layout with varied and informal plantings in pastel shades. It boasts a 12-acre garden of year-round interest with scented plants and magnificent vistas over parkland and rolling Hampshire countryside. Alternative gardens offered today are Hatchlands and Claredon. Hampshire/New Forest

DAY NINE

New Forest to IOW, Mottistone Manor, Osborne House

The Isle of Wight sits a short ferry crossing from Portsmouth and offers us a unique day out with some fabulous sightseeing opportunities. The jewel in today's crown is Osborne House. This was where Queen

Victoria chose to spend her Summers. The house and gardens are national treasures. Here, inside, you'll see how Queen Victoria lived (and also sneak a look 'beneath stairs' to see how her staff worked and lived). In the wonderful 50 acre gardens that sweep to the Swiss Cottage & its garden, you'll walk amongst magnolias, Lebanon cedar, azaleas and other in-season blooms. There's also a perfect Victorian walled kitchen garden.

A second visit for the day takes us to Mottistone Manor, a garden noted for its colourful herbaceous borders, grassy terraces planted with fruit trees and its sea views. The 16th- and 17th-century manor house, which is tenanted, lies at the heart of the Mottistone Estate, which offers delightful walks between the Downs and the coast.

We'll spend the rest of our day soaking up the atmosphere of this lovely little corner of the British Isles and exploring its coastline and resort towns. If we've time, and the inclination amongst group members, we might also see Morton House.

Hampshire/New Forest

DAY TEN

Highclere Castle, The Heale Gardens, Stourhead

We have several magnificent properties on today's visit schedule.

Stourhead is a celebrated 18th-century landscape garden and Palladian mansion with enchanting temples, monuments and rare planting around a tranquil lake and set in mature woodlands with a collection of exotic trees. A highlight is the stunning views you get from the top of Alfred's Tower, one of the finest garden follies you'll ever see.

Next, Highclere, one of England's most beautiful Victorian Castles set amidst spectacular Parkland. We have the risk the cliché and say that this building can only be described as 'breathtaking'. It is the largest mansion in Hampshire with a history going back over 500 years. It lies in a perfect park, the work of Capability Brown during 1774-7 but which also has remnants of the gardening activities of early monks who inhabited the place when it belonged to the Bishop Of Winchester.

Finally, we visit The Heale Garden. After the formality of our first two stops, this 8 acres of surprise and colour offers a sharp contrast. There's a confusion and cluttering that excites the eye and fires the imagination. Most visitors are inspired as everywhere there's a pocket of riches that one feels can be recreated in one's own humble patch! Hampshire/New Forest

DAY ELEVEN

Stonehenge, Wilton House, Mottisfont, Winchester

First to Wilton House, truly one of the country's treasure houses. Here, amidst nearly 500 years of history, you will experience living history at its very best as you wander through its magnificent rooms, marvel at its architecture, soak in its fine paintings or be swept off your feet by its spectacular gardens.

Another marvel nearby is self-selecting as an inclusion on our tour. Though not having any connection with a home or garden, we cannot drive by the amazing Stonehenge with at least a photo-opportunity stop!

Last on today's formal programme is the magnificent cathedral city of Winchester. The cathedral grounds are a delight and a walk beside the gentle river and its adjoining meadows reminds us that nature needs little help in giving us her own natural gardens.

Our journey back into London may offer a final opportunity for stopping at the gardens of Selbourne. Surely, no garden tour can be complete without at least the brief 'tipping of the hat' towards one of the great early gardeners and naturalists, Gilbert White.

You are dropped in London at your central hotel.