

Days of discovery

It's the perfect time to explore our gardens as they burst back into life this spring, with attractions for all ages

WORDS KELLY RAY



AUDLEY END HOUSE AND GARDENS, ESSEX

It's no surprise to discover that Audley End House, one of England's grandest mansions, is surrounded by equally jaw-dropping gardens. Over the centuries, they've been shaped by various owners and the landscape designers they employed, including Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Highlights of a visit today include the parterre garden and a thriving kitchen garden. Beyond the formal gardens, there's more to explore thanks to acres of sprawling parkland – the perfect place for a leisurely stroll or a game of hide and seek in the crisp spring air.

What to look out for in spring

Experience an explosion of colour as more than 16,000 bedding plants and 19,000 bulbs start to bloom. Kicking off with snowdrops in early spring,

both the formal gardens and landscape burst into life,' says head gardener Louise Ellis. 'This is followed by daffodils, then tulips and hyacinths within our spring bedding and container displays. The walled kitchen garden also awakens with fruit blossoms, colour in the cut flower borders and early crops such as rhubarb and asparagus.'

Family favourites

Gallop over to the Victorian stable yard to say hello to the resident horses. An interactive exhibition delves into life working at Audley End – you can even dress up as a Victorian coachman or groom. Kids can also let off steam in the playground, and they might even encounter one of our costumed storytellers relaying tales of the site's history.

'Experience an explosion of colour as more than 16,000 bedding plants and 19,000 bulbs start to bloom'



JOIN A TOUR

For details of our summer season of tours organised in collaboration with the National Gardens Scheme, go to www.english-heritage.org.uk/events

Left: A costumed storyteller at Audley End helps to bring the garden's story to life



Osborne's terraces are planted in a way that Queen Victoria would recognise

OSBORNE, ISLE OF WIGHT

'It is impossible to imagine a prettier spot,' said Queen Victoria of Osborne, her beloved Isle of Wight retreat. This magnificent Italianate coastal palace is complemented by meticulously crafted gardens and sprawling grounds, much of which were designed by Prince Albert. Its ornate terraces are planted in the same style Queen Victoria would have enjoyed over 150 years ago, while the walled garden reflects its later use by Queen Victoria as a cut flower garden.

What to look out for in spring

'Our daffodils and camellias often start flowering in mid-February,' says head

gardener Toby Beasley. 'From then, the season keeps getting better with our rhododendrons coming into bloom. But it's the terraces that steal the show with their spectacular display of spring bedding. Our wallflowers, pansies and tulips look their best in April.'

Family favourites

A family tree trail takes you around Osborne's parkland on a discovery of its historic trees. Following the trail leads to the Swiss Cottage – an Alpine-style chalet built to educate the nine royal children, with a museum housing quirky objects from around the world collected by the children and a kitchen garden where they grew vegetables outside. And look out for animal sculptures on your way down to Queen Victoria's private beach.

'It's the terraces that steal the show with their spectacular display of spring bedding'

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Look out for wildflowers in the King's Meadows this spring



Launched in 2023 in partnership with charity Plantlife to mark the coronation of King Charles III, the King's Meadows project aims to reintroduce wildflower-rich grasslands at sites ranging from Stonehenge in Wiltshire to Whitby Abbey in North Yorkshire. Reviving these once-common spaces will not only restore vital habitats for diverse flora and fauna, but also offer visitors the chance to immerse themselves in the natural beauty of these sites.

A species-rich meadow can provide interest from spring to late summer, when it is cut for hay. Established meadows will not only look beautiful but provide a diverse larder – of pollen, nectar and foliage – for a wide range of mammals, birds and pollinating insects.

Last year was a particularly good year for cowslips (*Primula veris*), the purple flowered green-winged orchid (*Anacamptis morio*), bird's foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and rough hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*).

To find a meadow or for more details, go to www.english-heritage.org.uk/100-meadows.



The gardens are filled with colourful plants

KIDS GO FREE

As a member you get free entry for up to six children within the family group

BRODSWORTH HALL AND GARDENS, SOUTH YORKSHIRE

Once the grand family home of the Thellusson family, Brodsworth Hall is an extraordinary reflection of the changing fortunes of a country house, and is presented much as it was when the last permanent resident, Mrs Sylvia Grant-Dalton, lived there. Outside, the gardens have been revived to their full Victorian splendour. Spacious green lawns and terraces surround the hall, while further away, distinct

spaces are revealed around every corner, from the rocky fern dell to the rose garden.

What to look out for in spring

The formal gardens look sharp after their winter trim, with hundreds of shapes and textures in the topiary. As you enter the flower garden, the sight of thousands of spring bedding plants dazzles the eye. The fern dell's dwarf bulbs

begin to put on a show and, in the rose garden, look out for early roses. Daffodils, bluebells and snowdrops adorn the lawns and woodland.

Family favourites

Spot the quirky garden buildings like the target house, along with the game larder and historic outdoor loo. There's also a year-round programme of events designed to entertain explorers of all ages.

WALMER CASTLE AND GARDENS, KENT

This Tudor artillery fort-turned-stately home is surrounded by award-winning gardens. Near the castle lies the tranquil Queen Mother's Garden and the Broadwalk Garden, with its striking 'cloud' hedge. Beyond the gardens, a chalk quarry was reinvented as a charming glen.

What to look out for in spring

'I have roots in the Netherlands, so I love the tulip display in the cuttings garden in spring – it's like a miniature Dutch bulb field,' says head gardener Philip Oostenbrink. 'We also have a collection of unusual snowdrop cultivars. Another spring favourite is the

Woodland Garden, with daphnes, winter aconites and colourful hellebores. Don't forget to smell the chocolate-scented flowers of the *Azara microphylla* tree by the Queen Mother's Garden.'

Family favourites

Follow the Woodland Walk to discover the nature-inspired play trail. Quirky spaces beckon young adventurers with wobbly bridges, climbing nets and a larger-than-life swing. And keep an eye out for the sculptures of birds dotted around the trail.

The Queen Mother's Garden was created by garden designer Penelope Hobhouse



BELSAY HALL, CASTLE AND GARDENS, NORTHUMBERLAND

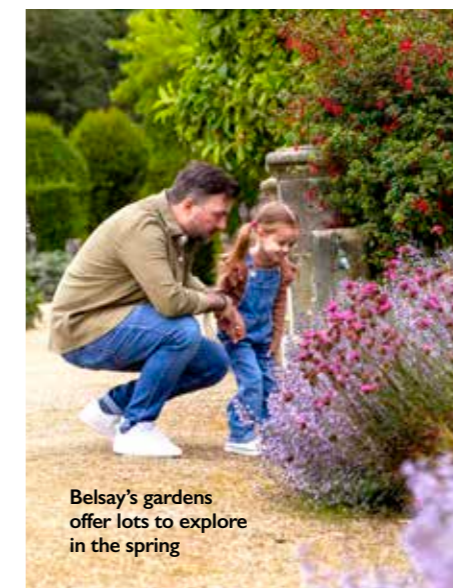
Belsay Hall served as home of the Middleton family for over seven centuries. Today, their legacy is embodied in a splendid Greek Revival mansion, magnificent castle and the vast, Grade I-registered gardens uniting them.

What to look out for in spring

'Many wonderful plants start flowering in the spring,' says garden supervisor Steven Richardson-Scurr. 'Look out for pulmonarias and hellebores, while azaleas and magnolias burst into life in the Quarry Garden.'

Family favourites

Embark on a family trail led by the enigmatic Wild Man, Belsay's mythical guardian. By the castle, there's also a Wild Man-inspired play area, while the old coach house has been transformed into a welcoming café.



Belsay's gardens offer lots to explore in the spring