

RHS Garden Wisley



The iconic Laboratory viewed from the wisteria-draped loggia on the far end of the canal.

that change with the seasons, wild and woodland gardens, gentle walks on winding paths, beautiful rose gardens and my favorite, a magnificent rock garden. Visits in the winter or early spring may not be as satisfying as during the warmer months, but there are always extensive collections of colorful ornamental exotics in the glasshouses at any time of the year.

The garden was established by George Wilson, a Victorian chemist, businessman and horticulturalist, who was also a former Treasurer of the Society. In 1878 he purchased 60 acres to establish the “Oakwood Experimental Garden” with the intent to “make difficult plants grow successfully.” It became renowned for its collection of lilies, gen-

The garden of the Royal Horticultural Society (R.H.S.) at Wisley is the flagship of four public gardens run by the Society. Located south of London in the English county of Surrey, it is one of the three most-visited paid gardens in the United Kingdom and one of the most spectacular gardens in Europe. Wisley was the Society’s first public garden, where the RHS still displays the very best of English gardening technique and practice (“the home of gardening in this land of gardeners”). This must-see garden combines practical information and inspiration, with a world famous collection of plants developed over more than 100 years. It is a lovely and unique place filled with wide mixed borders



The traditional carpet bed display in front of the Laboratory building. This 14ft square is the most intensely planted part of the garden, with approximately 10,000 plants and the design changed each year - a small but perfectly formed showcase.



The plantings along Long Ponds in spring.

tians, Japanese irises, primulas and water plants. The present Wild Garden at Wisley is the direct descendant of Oakwood and is still true to the original concept, despite many changes over time. After Wilson died in 1902, Sir Thomas Hanbury purchased Oakwood and adjacent wooded farmland, and the following year presented the estate in trust to the Society for its perpetual use.

Spread out over 240 acres, the gardens developed steadily as an ornamental garden, but also for educational and scientific purposes. A small laboratory was opened and the School of Horticul-

ture founded to prepare students for careers as professional gardeners. Trials of flowers, vegetables and fruit (an important part of the Society's work since 1860) were expanded and many demonstration areas added to show the public the best kinds of plants to grow. It is now large and diverse, with numerous formal and informal decorative gardens, as well as "model gardens" to show visitors what they can achieve in their own gardens. There are several greenhouses, including a new one completed in 2007. There are over 25,000 taxa of plants in the gardens, with special collections of orchids, hosta, cyclamen, and daffodils. National collections of *Crocus*, *Colchicum*, *Daboecia*, *Epimedium*, *Erica*, *Daphne*, *Galanthus*, *Hosta*, *Pulmonaria* and *Rheum* (rhubarb) are maintained at Wisley.

But this is much more than just a collection of plants – it is a source of inspiration. It has just about everything a horticulturist could want to see, and almost everything is clearly labeled. About half of Wisley is carefully manicured gardens, borders, water features, and show gardens. The remainder is trial grounds of all sorts of plants and trees. If you are in England, around London, Wisley is not to be missed!



Walk through the ornate wrought-iron Wilks Gates and around the corner to the half-timbered Tudor-style building known as the **Laboratory**. Built in 1914-16 for the Society's scientific staff, it now houses the administrative and scientific staff. The formal **Canal** in front of the Laboratory

The entrance to RHS Garden Wisley.

was designed by the distinguished landscape architects Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe and Lanning Roper in the 1960s. The water feature contains one of the largest collections of waterlilies in the UK. The loggia at the other end of the canal was formerly the potting shed and now supports a magnificent wisteria. The south-facing border along the canal is filled with perennials and half-hardy plants. The opposite has shrubby plantings to frame the **Conifer Lawn**, with its large, old trees – remnants of an earlier pinetum and the last survivors of some of Wisley's earliest plantings.



The Laboratory (L) is at one end of the formal canal, with a wisteria-draped loggia (C) at the other end. The Conifer Garden (R) is to the left of the buildings.

Behind the loggia in the central area are walled gardens and mixed borders. The two **Walled Gardens** are enclosed by 10-foot high red brick walls to protect the plants from frost. The walls are covered with



plants and the outside area is a mixed planting of perennials, vines, and woody plants.

Nearer the canal, the **Formal Garden** is laid out as a parterre containing a variety of spring and summer bedding schemes that are changed annually.

Beautiful red brick walls, covered with plants, enclose the Walled Gardens.



The Formal Garden is laid out as a parterre, filled with different color schemes of bedding plants.

In the rear of the Walled Garden the microclimate allows tender and subtropical plants to survive. This



Tender and sub-tropical plants, such as tree ferns (L), bananas and palms are sheltered within the walls of the Walled Garden.

area shows how to mix hardy and tender plants in a modern setting.



The Mixed Borders are filled with a variety of herbaceous perennials.

Also in the central area are the **Mixed Borders** which run either side of the slope leading up to Battleston Hill. The 20 foot wide borders packed with perennials are 420 feet long and are backed by hornbeam hedges. These borders are at their best from July to September. The Late Summer Borders run at right angles to the Mixed Borders and were designed to showcase plants blooming in late summer and autumn.

Adjacent to the borders in the central area are the **Country Garden** and **Golden Jubilee Rose Garden**. The Country Garden was designed by Penelope Hobhouse in three terraces on different levels, each linked with paths, on the sloping site. An avenue of 'Professor Sprenger' crabapple trees flank both sides of the garden, while white and purple wisteria drape the four 10-foot pergolas, and there is a specimen *Malus hupenensis* in each of the four corners. The central circular pool provides a focal point. The plantings are mainly herbaceous perennials with some shrubs and bulbs. The plantings are color-themed to provide interest over a long period. Each bed is designed as a model for small gardens. The



Pergolas in the Country Garden drip with wisteria in the spring (L), while the herbaceous perennials soften the hardscaping. The focal point of the garden is a central fountain (R).

formal rectilinear layout of the hardscaping is softened by the informal plantings.

Battleston Hill is off the central area. The woodland garden there suffered extensive storm damage in 1987, and many of the tall trees there were lost. But this provided an opportunity to create a Mediterranean garden in the well-drained soil on the hill, and to re-model other parts of the gardens extensively. The acid soil at Wisley is ideal for rhododendrons, camellias, and azaleas, and vast areas of the hills have been replanted with these shrubs, providing a glorious display each spring and early summer. Numerous winding footpaths make the area more accessible. There are large plantings of magnolias, *Pieris*, hydrangea, lilies, daylilies and maples for fall color. The hottest part of the garden, on the south side, has a collection of sun-loving plants from the Mediterranean, Australia, California and South Africa.



Rhododendrons and azaleas along the winding paths on Battleston Hill.

Beyond Battleston Hill, the finest flowers and vegetables are

identified from the countless new introductions in the **Trials Field**. Here plants are grown specifically for the purpose of comparing quality and performance of the different cultivars and assessing their garden merit. Dahlias, delphiniums, chrysanthemums and sweet peas are evaluated each year, while other annual and biennial flowers, plus some perennials and vegetables are changed each year. The trials are one of the important aspects of the work of the garden.

In another section of the garden is the **Fruit Field**. The Royal Horticulture Society has always been the holder of an outstanding collection of fruit, now with over 1,300 different cultivars of all types of fruit. A 16-acre fruit orchard has more than 670 different apple cultivars. In season, the fruit of many of these are available for sale and eating. The majority of the apple trees were planted in the 1950's, arranged according to their season of ripening and divided into eating and cooking apples. Cider apples were added in 1999. There are also strawberries, blackcurrants, quince, grapes, cherries and various hybrid berries and nuts. The **Fruit Mount** – an artificial hill – was added in 2000 to provide better views. This concept originated in the 14th century and mounts were particular favorites in the 18th century garden landscape. The mount here includes vines, step-over apple trees and blackberries. **Model Fruit Gardens** demonstrate dwarfing rootstocks, container production, and various forms of training (spindle bushes, cordons, espaliers, fans and more).



Fruit has always been an important focus of the RHS, and Model Fruit Gardens (L), a Fruit Mount (LC) and extensive apple orchards (R) fill a large section.

Running between the Fruit Mount and the new Bicentenary Glasshouse are the **Piet Oudolf Borders** (designed by the Dutch plantsman and designer Piet Oudolf). These wide borders embrace a modern



approach to naturalistic perennial planting inspired by prairies to give the impression of walking in a meadow. Over 16,000 perennials and grasses were planted in 2001 in more than 30 diagonal drifts of three or four cultivars.

in April 2005 construction began on a major new feature, the **Bicentenary Glasshouse**,

The Piet Oudolf Borders run from the Fruit Mount down to the new Bicentenary Glasshouse.

that opened in June 2007. It covers three quarters of an acre and overlooks a new lake built at the same time (which provides a reservoir for periods of drought). The 40 foot tall structure with rippling roof curves and a simple beauty both inside and out is divided into three main planting zones representing desert, tropical and moist temperate climates. A path winds past rocky outcrops, waterfalls and pools, and the tender plant collection, including rare and endangered species and hundreds of varieties of orchids. The plantings combine newly contributed large specimens and relocated collections (including a staghorn fern more than 100 years old). The glasshouse is surrounded by a landscape garden designed by Tom Stuart Smith that incorporates some 60,000 perennials in a series of beds that gradually changing from blocks to drifts and eventually link with the existing Piet Oudolf Borders.

The original display glasshouses were a tropical paradise with plants from around the world. Visitors wandered through landscaped borders and benched displays of hundreds of plants from all areas of the world. The old glasshouses were dismantled and relocated, reused or recycled by January 2008. There is a Maize Maze (made entirely from tall sunflowers, sweet corn and green beans in the shape of a well-known Chinese animal) on the site of the old glasshouse in summer 2008.



The old glasshouses (now dismantled and replaced by the Bicentennial Glasshouse) contained beautiful collections of temperate and tropical plants, including the Singapore Orchid House, Traditional Victorian Showhouse, and various outdoor displays.

The **Model Gardens** were created to offer practical design ideas with the needs of the average home gardener in mind. The 10 gardens were designed by a variety of garden designers or Wisley staff and



Ten Model Gardens demonstrate practical landscape design ideas on a small scale.



Ten Model Gardens demonstrate practical landscape design ideas on a small scale.

students in an area typical of a town garden. Both modern and traditional styles are included. Some of the gardens were award-winning Chelsea Flower Show entries re-installed here.

Between the Model Gardens and leading on to Weather Hill are two colorful exotic **Subtropical Borders**. Bananas, cannas and ginger lilies are prominent components; they are removed when the weather gets cold to overwinter under glass.



The Subtropical Borders are filled with blooming cannas and other tropical plants in late summer.

On gently sloping **Weather Hill** (named from the meteorological station which once stood at its top) are the **Rose Borders** filled with hybrid teas and floribundas, graded according to color, with the darker shades at the bottom of the hill.



Atop Weather Hill are the Rose Borders, filled with tea, floribunda and climbing roses.

Also on the slopes of Weather Hill are the **Alpine Houses**, showcasing true montane plants that are adapted to cope with a harsh existence high on mountainsides, but not necessarily the conditions in England (winter rain followed by frost). The houses attempt to replicate the conditions these special plants need. In the **Landscape Alpine House** (rebuilt in 1995-96), a simulated dry gully runs between miniature cliffs of several rock types that provide niches for temperamental plants. A system of geo textile membranes, gravel and perforated drainage pipes leading to a sump hidden beneath the rocks provides the drainage essential for the successful growing of these plants.



The Landscape Alpine House has a naturalistic display of plants under glass.

In the **Alpine Display House** a range of potted plants from mountainous areas all over the world are on show, sunk into beds of sand (which acts as insulation to protect the potting medium from overheating or freezing). The displays are changed throughout the year to ensure year-round color from both flowers and foliage, and to allow plants to rest.



Potted specimens of alpine plants from around the world are brought into the Alpine Display House when they are at their peak.

Surrounding the alpine houses is a range of drystone walls made from Sussex sandstone and Purbeck limestone, as well as tufa wall. Hypertufa sinks and troughs give ideas for growing alpines and other small plants outdoors in limited space.



Outside the Alpine Houses, less demanding plants are exhibited in drystone walled beds and troughs.

Between the Alpine Houses and Model Vegetable Garden are the **Monocot Borders**. The plants in



The Monocot Borders feature grasses, *Kniphofia* (R), and other types of monocots, including *Yucca constricta* (LC).

these borders belong to the division of flowering plants known as Monocotyledons, characterized by the production of only one cotyledon or seed leaf. 'Monocots' usually have narrow leaves with parallel veining and the flower parts are in threes or multiples of three. Grasses and members of the Lily and Iris families are well-known examples of Monocotyledons. The majority of the plants in this border, including *Crocsmia*, *Kniphofia*, and many ornamental grasses, are at their best in late summer and autumn.

The **Model Vegetable Garden** is one of Wisley's main practical demonstration features to show old and new cultivation techniques and methods of vegetable production. Over 50 different types of vegetables are planted in several different, average family-sized plots, as well as in tighter spots to give ideas for growing in a limited space or in containers. All of the waste generated here is recycled in the compost bins.



The Model Vegetable Garden demonstrates how to grow vegetables in both large, family-sized plots, and in small spaces. The composting demonstration recycles all the waste from this garden.

Below the Model Vegetable Garden the ground goes down to Long Ponds. In spring, the grassy part of the slope – the **Alpine Meadow** – is transformed into a sheet of yellow by thousands of daffodils, dog-tooth violets, snakeshead fritillaries and *Crocus tommasinianus*. The grass is uncut until the summer, then is closely mown until the autumn-flowering crocus appear.



In spring the grassy Alpine Meadow adjacent to the Rock Garden is a field of yellow flowers.

The other part of the slope has the fabulous **Rock Garden**, designed by Edward White in 1911. Beautifully laid out on a the hillside with paths winding throughout the Sussex sandstone blocks, this major engineering feat required construction of a light railway from the nearest road to get the stone to the

location. Careful attention was paid to positioning of the rocks to achieve the natural appearance. The bank was renovated in 2004 to include a dramatic waterfall with its Japanese-style landscape designed and constructed by Professor Masao Fukuhara.



The steep upper portion of the Rock Garden and the waterfall.

The slope faces north and suits many plants that prefer a cool shady spot, while sun-loving plants are positioned on the more exposed outcrops.



There is tremendous diversity of plants growing in the Rock Garden, including many conifers, Japanese maples and herbaceous perennials.

Numerous paths lead down and around the rocky outcroppings and small pools that are linked by streams and cascades, eventually flowing into Long Ponds below. This is one of the most spectacular and memorable parts of the gardens – especially when viewed from below.



The water moving down the slopes of the Rock Garden eventually end up in Long Ponds.

The most historic part of Wisley is the **Wild Garden**. Although the original ‘Oakwood’ has been much altered it remains true to his intent of “growing difficult plants successfully” in a naturalistic style. The peaty soil is ideal for growing woodland plants, and the area contains a wide variety of hostas, primulas, trilliums and other woodland plants. Lower-growing trees and shrubs fill the middle layer, with magnolias and rhododendrons providing spring color and other trees displaying rich shades of red and orange autumn color.



Parts of the Wild Garden in spring.

Seven Acres was originally rough pastureland, thought to be unsuitable for cultivation, until an iron pan lying just below the surface of the soil was discovered and broken up in the 1920's. Two ponds are separated by a grass causeway. The smaller of the two, known as the Round Pond, began as a source of gravel for the garden paths and has remained a water feature ever since, although both bodies of water were redesigned in 2000. The planting around the ponds focuses on four seasonal themes, with summer at the eastern end, spring to the west, and autumn and winter drifting throughout.



Seven Acres has a wide selection of trees, shelters, and two ponds, with dancing crane sculptures in one.

Leading from the ponds along the edge of Seven Acres to the restaurant is the **Grass Border**. Herbaceous perennials and annuals add color and contrast. The grasses range from large scale plantings to collections suitable for a home garden.



Both large and small-scale grasses are displayed in the Grass Border on the way to the restaurant.

Beyond the Grass Border, restaurant, and edge of Seven Acres is the **Pinetum** and **Howard's Field**. The Pinetum takes its name from the towering pines first planted by George Wilson around 1989. A number of these original trees are now champion trees. Beyond the Pinetum is the quiet Howard's Field with it's huge, cushion-like beds that house the National Heather Collection, collections of ornamental trees (birch, red oak, cherry), and a Clematis trial.

In addition to the permanent displays, there are also special programs throughout the year, such as garden walks, plant society shows and contests, a wide range of short courses and more.



Special attractions include flower shows and other events.

The **Wisley Shop** offers the world's finest collection of horticultural books as well as other gifts, while there are over 10,000 varieties of plants for sale in the **Wisley Plant Centre**. Even if you can't take a plant home, you can still ask questions of the center's gardening experts seven days a week. There are also five different places to purchase food, including the Conservatory Cafe and Terrace Restaurant.



The Wisley Plant Centre.

RHW Wisley Garden is located in Woking, Surrey, England. The gardens are open all year, except Christmas Day from 9:00 (M-F) or 10 a.m. (weekends) to 6:00 p.m. (to 4:30 p.m. November to February), although the gardens are closed to non-members of the RHS on summer Sundays. Admission is £8 for adults in 2008 (check the website for current prices). There is access to all parts of the garden for non-walkers, but some of the paths are quite rough.

Wisley is 20 miles southwest of London and can be reached by car on the A3. Public transportation to the gardens is limited, but not too difficult. You can get there by train (from London Waterloo Station to West Byfleet or Woking, with a short taxi ride from the station or on weekdays during the summer months, by special bus service from Woking Station) or by bus (hourly buses, every day, from Surbiton train station and Guildford bus stations).

– Susan Mahr, *University of Wisconsin*

Additional Information:

- RHS Garden Wisley – the official site at www.rhs.org.uk/WhatsOn/gardens/wisley/
- The Glasshouse, RHS Garden Wisley, virtual tour at glasshouse.schoolscience.co.uk/