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Chelsea Flower Show Judge Chooses the 10 Best Gardens in the World



Portland Japanese Garden CREDIT: DENNIS FRATES

Christopher Bailes , garden expert

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Travelling to see gardens is one of the most rewarding and pleasurable forms of tourism. At its purest, gardening is a manifestation of mankind's love of plants, beauty and landscape, and gardens are as infinitely varied as the people and cultures that create them. A great deal can be discovered about countries or individuals through their gardens. The range of garden styles is immense, encompassing the great set-piece formal garden created as a statement of power and wealth, and the suburban plot in which enthusiasts indulge their passion for particular plants in surprisingly small spaces. Whether humble or grand, most gardeners delight in sharing their creations with others. Choosing just ten gardens from among my favourites, whether historic landscapes, botanic gardens, or the personal creations of individual gardeners has been a difficult task, but all of these richly deserve a visit.

1. Singapore Botanic Gardens

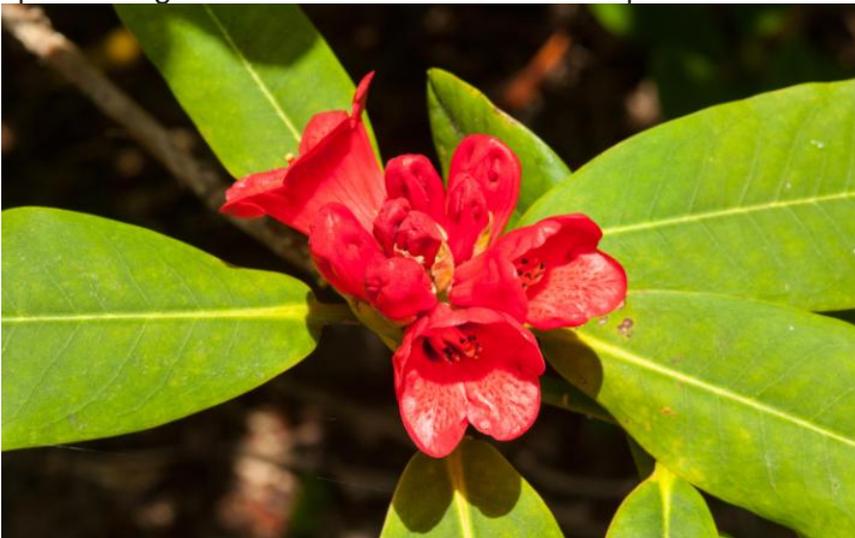
Singapore Botanic Gardens offers a real taste of the tropics, with collections of economic plants, gingers and spices set in a charming colonial era landscape dating back to its founding as a leisure garden and public park (where the locals can be observed doing tai chi in quieter areas). As a committed orchidophile, the vibrant National Orchid Garden is high on the list of attractions for me, and among other rich ornamental plantings there is a remarkable collection of colourful bromeliads. As an antidote to all this colour, the garden still preserves a piece of Singapore's original rain forest.



Singapore Botanic Gardens CREDIT: ALAMY

2. Pukeiti Gardens, Taranaki, New Zealand

Nestling in lush temperate rain forest on the slopes of New Zealand's Mount Egmont, Pukeiti hosts a fabulous collection of rhododendrons, camellias, magnolias, and other woodland treasures. A mild climate with three to four metres of rain a year provides ideal conditions for luxuriant growth of plants from the Himalayas, China and Japan. It has rightly been described as "the ultimate rhododendron experience", but aside from the remarkable plant collection, the special magic of Pukeiti for me lies in its unique blend of exotic and native plants.



3. Giverny

Monet's garden at Giverny richly deserves its iconic status. It's really two gardens in one: by the house the cottagey and colourful Flower Garden either side of the central Grande Allee, with a remarkably rich mixture of perennials, annuals, climbers and roses. The planting in the Flower Garden has a vivacity rarely seen elsewhere, seemingly setting aside the rules of association of colour and form in an impressionistic floral cornucopia. The Japanese-inspired water garden, with the waterlilies to which he returned so often in his paintings, provides a quieter, reflective contrast.



Monet's garden at Giverny CREDIT: TIM GARTSIDE

4. Lotusland, Santa Barbara, California

Lotusland was created by Polish opera singer Ganna Walska, and visitors should prepare themselves for the ultimate theatrical garden experience. Perhaps only in the climate and culture of southern California could such a creation have been conceived and accepted, a fantasy of remarkable set-pieces of design and planting quite unlike any other garden. The living architecture of palms and succulents is juxtaposed with exotic hard landscaping using a remarkable range of materials from volcanic scoria to green glass diamonds and abalone shells; theatrical both in intent and in execution.



Lotusland CREDIT: DAMIAN P GADA

5. Portland Japanese Garden

The Japanese Garden in Portland brings tranquillity to the heart of a busy city. Designed by Takuma Tono, it successfully achieves the desired effect of peace and harmony through its compositions of stone, water, and plants in five traditional Japanese styles. Reflecting nature in idealised form, and surrounded by native woodland, the garden has a real sense of separation and seclusion from the world outside. My second visit to this uniquely peaceful garden in autumn was richly rewarded with a feast of leaf colour from Japanese maples.



The Japanese Garden in Portland CREDIT: DENNIS FRATES

6. Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden, South Africa

Dramatically situated on the lower slopes of Cape Town's Table Mountain, Kirstenbosch set out from its earliest days to showcase and preserve its nation's flora. The result is a garden that celebrates the phenomenal diversity found in the Cape, going back in botanical time to living plant fossils such as cycads. The abiding memories of Kirstenbosch for me lie in the superb displays of brilliant indigenous flowers, set alongside the characterful nature of so many South African plants. To experience the "real thing" you can make your way to the surrounding hillsides where the original bush still thrives.



Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden, CREDIT: ALAMY

7. Tresco Abbey Garden, Isles of Scilly

When I first set foot in the Abbey Garden in 1979 I could scarcely believe I was still in the British Isles. Sometimes referred to as “Kew’s Temperate House with the lid off”, the mixture of plants that flourishes here is like no other. The island’s mild maritime climate and free-draining granitic soil accommodate tender plants from countries with a Mediterranean climate such as South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Mexico. The result is a unique collection of plants in an idyllic setting.



Tresco Abbey Garden CREDIT: ASHLEY COOPER

8. Great Dixter, Sussex

Dixter is the kind of garden to go to when you need to have your preconceptions of “what should be planted with what” given a thorough jolt. Christopher Lloyd’s creation stands out as the expression of a great original, intent on experimentation and iconoclastic to the last. His innovative use of colour and form finds expression in a garden of remarkable richness and diversity, taking as much delight in preserving the simplicity of traditional orchid-rich meadows as it does in brilliantly composed vibrant sub-tropical plantings.



Great Dixter, Sussex CREDIT: JOHN GLOVER / ALAMY

9. Mount Stewart, Northern Island

At Mount Stewart a wide range of styles come together to create a garden of remarkable scale, diversity, wit and whimsy (for example the statuary on the Dodo Terrace). The garden around the house brings together an eclectic assemblage of influences, including parterres and a Gertrude Jekyll sunken garden. It has a great sense of style and joie de vivre and is wonderfully planted throughout. Elsewhere specimen southern hemisphere plants such as the mountain cabbage palm from New Zealand (*Cordyline indivisa*) grow to prodigious proportions.



Mount Stewart CREDIT: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE

10. RHS Garden Rosemoor, Torrington, Devon

Tucked into the valley of the River Torridge, Rosemoor has been subtly designed to fit within the pre-existing field pattern. The garden has a strong sense of place, with traditional techniques and local materials used throughout. The planting is rich and varied, with something for everyone, including flower-rich meadows in parkland, woodland gardens, ornamental lakes and ponds, and the unique shaded gulley garden. The Formal Garden features roses, borders and themed plantings, and a productive Fruit and Vegetable Garden rounds off a remarkably diverse palette of plants – but then having spent 22 years as Curator there I guess I would say that, wouldn't I?



Rosemoor CREDIT: CAROLE DRAKE

THE AUTHOR

Christopher Bailes is a judge at this year's Chelsea Flower Show. He is an RHS judge and a member of the Society's Gardens and Orchid Committees. Christopher joined the Royal Horticultural Society as Curator of Rosemoor Garden in 1988, and from 1995 to 2001 was also Curator of Hyde Hall. After leaving the RHS in 2010 he became Curator of Chelsea Physic Garden, retiring in 2014. He has written numerous articles and books on orchids and general gardening, including *Hardy Orchids* and *Hollies for Gardeners*.