

SPRING OUTING

Tuesday 14th May 2019

Haslemere
Gardening
Society

Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens, Brighton Road, Lower Beeding, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 6PP



Leonardslee estate at Lower Beeding, near Horsham in West Sussex has been described as the 'Finest Spring Gardens in England'. You can enjoy the beautiful 240 acres of landscaped Grade I listed gardens, first planted in 1801 and see the outstanding spring displays of rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias, magnolias, bluebells and the beautiful ornamental rock garden.

The Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens re-opened in 2019 after a long closure.

Leonardslee is one of those gardens that reveals more the further you explore. The sheer scale, the dramatic valleys, the layers of planting, the abundant wildlife, and the inclusion of art all combine to form a place quite unlike any other Sussex estate. The gardens are essentially made up of a series of steep, wooded valleys carved by seven lakes, creating a natural amphitheatre for planting. The upper slopes are home to mature woodlands, champion trees, and sweeping avenues of rhododendrons, while the mid-slopes offer dramatic views down to the water, framed by azaleas, camellias, and magnolias. On the valley floor, you'll find lakes, bridges, waterfowl, and tranquil, reflective vistas. The Rock Garden stands out as a Victorian showpiece, with its sandstone outcrops and alpine plantings. The overall design, true to its Victorian roots, is immersive, romantic, and theatrical, featuring long sightlines and sudden, surprising reveals.

One of Leonardslee's defining features is its renowned Rhododendron Loderi hybrids, developed by the Loder family in the early 20th century. These magnificent, fragrant, pale-flowered rhododendrons can reach impressive, tree-like proportions. Other plant highlights include spectacular magnolias in March and April, numerous historic camellia cultivars, vast banks of azaleas that burst into colour in May, and champion trees such as giant redwoods, swamp cypress, and tulip trees. Come autumn, the Japanese maples, liquidambar, and nyssa around the lakes provide a dazzling display of seasonal colour. The garden is forever changing, offering a different character with each season.

Wildlife adds to Leonardslee's unique charm. Wallabies, introduced in the 1880s, roam freely and are often seen near the lakes or woodland edges, while the resident deer herd enhances the sense of a semi-wild landscape. Birdlife is particularly rich, with kingfishers, mandarin ducks, nuthatches, treecreepers, herons, and egrets all making appearances. The lakes themselves create a calm, reflective atmosphere, setting Leonardslee apart from the more formal gardens found elsewhere in Sussex.

The estate's history is just as fascinating. In 1801, Sir Stephen Glynne purchased the estate and began the early landscaping. The Loder family took over in the mid-19th century, developing the valley gardens, importing exotic species, and initiating the breeding of rhododendrons. The gardens were closed from 2010 to 2019 for a major restoration, reopening after one of the largest restoration projects in Europe. This work included clearing overgrowth, replanting historic cultivars, restoring paths, repairing dams, and reviving the Rock Garden to its former glory.

Leonardslee has embraced contemporary art, setting it apart from many other historic gardens. Large-scale sculptures are integrated into the woodland, an art gallery in Leonardslee House features rotating

exhibitions, and “Beyond the Doll’s House” presents a detailed Edwardian miniature world, complete with working lights, tiny figures, and seasonal scenes. These elements bring an extra layer of narrative and curiosity to any visit.

The estate is also known for its food and hospitality. Restaurant Interlude, which holds a Michelin star, offers a multi-course tasting menu based on foraged and estate-grown ingredients, giving a real sense of place and season. Leonardslee House provides boutique accommodation and boasts a Michelin Key, a rare accolade.

Exploring Leonardslee is described by many as an immersive and peaceful experience. The gardens feel vast yet coherent, inviting you to wander for hours. There’s a strong sense of both history and modernity, making it a garden that feels rooted in its past while still engaging with the present.

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