

Other Things to Experience in the Levens Hall Garden

A visit to the Levens Hall Gardens is not just about paying homage to topiary. The 10-acre gardens have a unique charm at every turn, much of it imbued by Beaumont's original design or subsequent reinterpretations of it.

The garden is never the same two years running and changes from week to week, thanks to an extremely considered planting scheme that sees new species emerging as the days pass, to replace other varieties that wowed a few weeks earlier. The gardening team grow over 30,000 bedding plants each year and ensure these are then transplanted into the gardens, to add new features, slightly different hues and moods and continuous interest. A visitor to Levens Hall & Gardens in early April, will witness very different things to those who visit as the season is drawing to a close in September or early October.

There is much balance and contrast across the garden and this can be seen in the two differently themed double herbaceous borders, one of which is planted in pastel hues – pink, yellow, pastel blue, cream and white – and the other of which, the Red Border, is planted with species which display the reds, dark blues, bronzes and deep purples of the colour spectrum.

These double borders run alongside broad grass paths that run east to west across the garden. These paths dissect the garden in two, before it is quartered by the crossing beech hedge walks. The main walks are then further divided by the Beech Circle, creating interesting and different dimensions to various parts of the garden, discovered as the visitor journeys through.

The Pastel Borders, on the eastern side of the garden and lining the east-west walk, have species such as clematis growing on wood and wire pyramids in early spring, adding visual interest at height, before other varieties, such as sweet peas, take over in summer. Mainstays of the Pastel Borders are hyacinth-like plants such as 'Rosea' (*Stachys macrantha*) and the sulphur-yellow *Euphorbia palustris*. Grassy foliage and tall flowers, such as *Iris sibirica*, complement this, whilst in early summer, there is an eruption of the tiny white flowers of *Crambe cordifolia*. Plantings either side of the path mirror each other, whilst adding a distinct rhythm to the area.

The Red-purple Borders are a smouldering sight for anyone leaving the stillness and sanctuary of the Beech Circle and powerfully convey warmth and architectural majesty, with the latter delivered by spikier, broad-leaved and almost sub-tropical varieties. The Red Borders also feature plants that produce red and purple hips in autumn, ensuring season-long interest. Varieties here again change each year but can often include delphiniums, aconitums, purple-bearded iris, *Silene asterias* with its pin-cushion red blobs, herbaceous lobelia, *Canna indica*, castor oil plants of the *Ricinus communis* (Carmencita) variety and *Knautia macedonica*. It's all a red carpet entrance for those approaching the ha-ha, which lies at the end of the pathway.

The Fountain Garden is also not to be missed. Beaumont created this area with a very large circle and four pathways cutting across it. Submerged under a tennis court in the 1920s and then ploughed up and used for cut-flower production in the 1960s, his original vision could have been lost, were it not for the work that was carried out to help celebrate the Topiary Garden's 300th birthday, in 1994.

Enclosing the yew hedges and carrying out a redefinition of the original vistas was the groundwork for this area's revitalisation. The vision involved installing a formal, circular pool,

featuring a jet fountain at its centre. Ornamental oak seats were placed around the fountain, backed by a circular pleached lime screen. Pathways of red-twigged lime were created, to add an intriguing tunnel feel to exit routes and to recapture the mood of a Tudor garden, in which the owners would seek to avoid the rays of the sun by walking through arbours, similar to these modern incarnations.

The pool's surface changes according to the weather conditions, the colour of the sky and the time of day but, when still, mirrors the garden's greenery and the stonework of Levens Hall. The pool's sides are steep, to avoid herons feeding on the golden fish inside. It is the centrepiece of a haven for those wishing to gain some moments of quiet reflection.

That same mindfulness can be enjoyed in either the Topiary Garden, where the balance and symmetry of many pieces, or a focus on particular shapes, can concentrate the mind. Mindfulness is also highly achievable in the Beech Circle, where tranquillity is the order of the day.

The Beech Circle is at the heart of Beaumont's garden and is a central hub from which four main pathways radiate. Five-metres high and easily five-metres in width, the hedge seems to instil a feeling of sanctuary, whilst the ambience within its protected 'space' feels precious and peaceful.

In spring, the waft of wild garlic can be detected by those moving close to the hedge's dark green, vertical walls, whilst the floral feast that emerges in this area in summer offers not just colour but amazing fragrances too. It creates an inspiring 'zone' for those wishing to contemplate life or foster creativity and its domed archway entrances are always happy to welcome those wishing to spend a few contentment-filled hours within its peaceful natural walls.

Heading to the ha-ha and gazing at the view beyond enables the visitor to appreciate how special Beaumont's vision must have appeared at its time and when Colonel Grahme was determined to accentuate all the glories of his Lake District residence.

But some of the features are more modern. One is the Willow Labyrinth, well worth checking out, as it was especially created, by planting and training willow plants into the shape that can be seen today.

Visitors should also not ignore the Orchard, where mistletoe seeds were intentionally sown, to encourage the growth of the festive plant amidst the apple trees, with this being a triumph and a sight to behold when the plant is at its festive best.

In The Wilderness, they can also discover the Smoke House, to which smoking family members were banished, if they wished to light up!

The Bowling Green is one of the areas of the gardens that has a rich history. Today, it mainly hosts games of croquet, but it is well worth contemplating how the 17th and 18th century Radish Feast would once have enlivened life in this part of the gardens, where, when the festivities were not taking place, the Grahmes would have played bowls on their dedicated facility.

At the time of the Radish Feast, huge trestle tables, piled high with radishes grown on the estate, oatcakes and vast quantities of Morocco Ale – the secret brew associated with Levens Hall – were located here, so that newcomers could pass the initiation test of standing on one

leg, downing a large 'constable' of Morocco Ale and attempting to walk across the Bowling Green in a straight line, whilst blindfolded. This event was a highlight of the social calendar, held on May 12 each year, to coincide with the Milnthorpe Fair and put Levens Hall at the centre of local social life.

It is also worth reflecting that the recipe for Morocco Ale was hidden in the Levens Hall Gardens during the English Civil War, to prevent it falling into the hands of Cromwell and his men. Where would you have hidden it?

As you walk around the gardens, glancing at the vegetable borders will also give you the chance to see some of the produce that is used within Levens Kitchen, be that rhubarb, asparagus or beans. Wall Borders also treat visitors to the scent of sweet vanilla, the sight of butterflies feeding on buddlejas and also the beautiful treat of wisteria growing up the walls.

With all of this available to visitors to the Levens Hall gardens, there is much value to be derived from gardens admission alone. Head to www.levenshall.co.uk to pre-book your garden tickets and attempt to visit more than once in the season, so you can appreciate this ever-changing, living garden to the full.

ENDS

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Editors' notes

Levens Hall and Gardens opens Sunday to Thursday (closed Fridays and Saturdays) to October 6, 2022. Gardens' opening hours are 10am to 5pm, with last entry at 4pm. The Hall opens at 10am for tours (subject to availability on the day) and at 11am for general admission and is open until 3.30pm (last entry at 3pm).

Levens Kitchen opens every day, from 10am to 5pm to October 6, 2022 and then closes one hour earlier thereafter, through to December 23, 2022. The gift shop opens from 10am to 5pm until October 6 and then opens from 10.30am to 3pm until December 23, 2022.

Adult entrance costs £14.50 for Gardens and tour of the Hall. A child's ticket is priced at £5 and a family ticket at £36. Gardens-only tickets are priced at £10.50, £4 and £26, respectively. Hall and Gardens tickets currently have to be bought on the day, but Gardens-only tickets can be purchased online at www.levenshall.co.uk