



Starting a colourful new chapter

Abandoned and left to grow wild for a decade, the gardens at Leonardslee in West Sussex were rescued in 2017 and renovated with spectacular effect. They are now at their most impressive in spring

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Colourful parades of acid-loving rhododendrons and azaleas fill the gardens with a riot of colour that delights visitors to Leonardslee in spring.



Rhododendron 'Percy Wiseman' (above, left) and one of many in the gardens yet to be identified (above). Wallabies in the gardens (left) are descendants of the original red-necked wallabies Edward Loder brought from Tasmania in 1889, when he bought the property from his father-in-law.

From 1803 Charles Beauclerk planted palms and conifers in his American Garden (below). His rhododendrons and camellias are still enjoyed today.



LEONARDSLEE LAKES & GARDENS

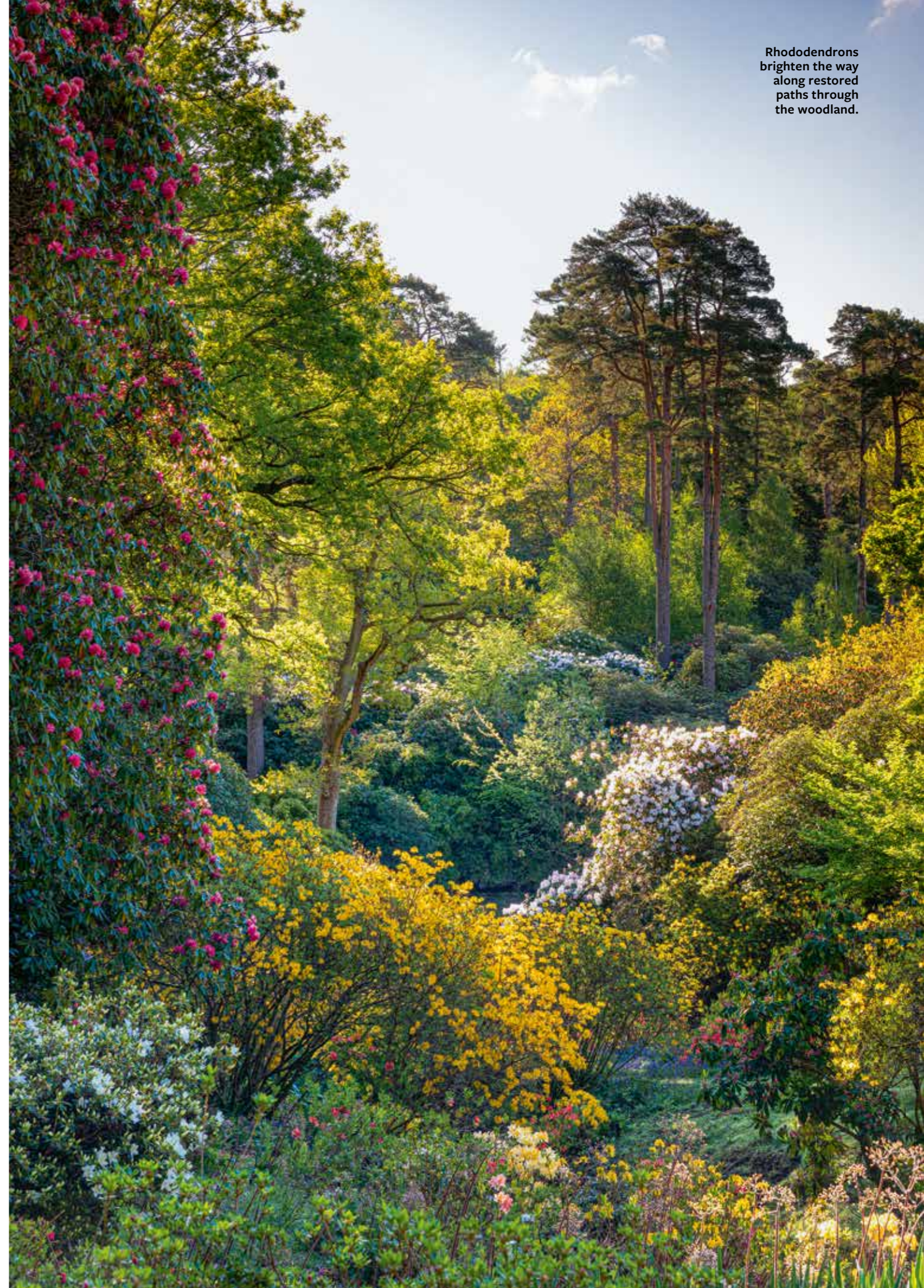
Just a decade ago, the future looked bleak for Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens in West Sussex. Once famous for its fine vistas and dramatic pools, a renowned crucible of new rhododendrons, and home to one of the best and most intact Pulhamite rockeries in the land, it had been dubbed 'The finest woodland garden in England'. But in recent years it had declined. Developed and tended by generations of prominent plantsmen, the estate had gradually been sold off and eventually the gardens, too, had to go. And, when the new owner was refused planning permission to develop the site, he just shut the gate and left. The gardens seemed doomed. 'At that point, Leonardslee was considered a famous but lost garden; spoken of sadly and in hushed tones,' says Head Gardener Jamie Harris. 'It lay abandoned for nearly 10 years, but in 2017, Penny Streeter drove past. She stopped on a whim, took a look around, and decided on the spot that she was going to buy it.'

Hacking back for two years

At the point she bought it, the gardens that had so thoroughly captivated businesswoman and entrepreneur Penny were bordering on derelict. They were wild, woolly and seriously overgrown; the lakes were thick with algae and the rock garden was surrounded by trees. 'There was a fire going for two years, while the team hacked and slashed their way to a point where it could reopen,' says Jamie. 'It was a period of hugely rapid change; lots of infrastructure went in, buildings and glasshouses had to be repaired, and paths restored,' he says. Energetic innovators with no shortage of ambition, the Streeter family put a 10-year plan in place that took no prisoners in pursuit of success. The gardens relaunched in 2019, managed by Penny's son Adam, and a Michelin star restaurant, a hotel and a sculpture park have since been added. 'It's considered the most important garden restoration since Heligan – there is never a dull day at Leonardslee, believe me,' says Jamie. Originally part of St Leonard's Forest – gifted in its entirety in the 17th century by King Charles II to his physician, Sir Edward Greaves – the site was bought around 1803 by Charles Beauclerk, who landscaped the grounds and created an American Garden, filled with palms and conifers and early specimens of giant redwood (*Sequoiadendron*) »

'It's considered the most important garden restoration since Heligan.'

Rhododendrons brighten the way along restored paths through the woodland.





giganteum). Beauclerk, making the most of the acidic soil, planted the first rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias for which the gardens are now legendary.

Making horticultural history

In 1852 Leonardslee was acquired by William Hubbard, who built the grand Italianate mansion, before selling the property to his son-in-law Edmund Loder in 1889. And it was he who began the next phase of the garden. Horticulturally, the Loders had form: Edmund's father owned the garden at High Beeches and his brother soon bought Wakehurst Place. But Edmund was determined to create a notable plant collection of his own and travelled widely, stocking his specially commissioned rock garden with alpinines and ferns. With an ericaceous

ornamental woodland already at his fingertips, other creative juices soon began to flow.

'Edmund was getting interested in hybridization and in 1901 he crossed *Rhododendron fortunei* with *R. griffithianum*. The resulting plant flowered in 1907 and became the first Loderi hybrid,' says Jamie. There are 35 hybrids now and they combine their parents' qualities – large flowers and attractive bark from *R. griffithianum*, and the heavenly scent and vigorous growth from *R. fortunei*. They are big, tree rhododendrons and can be difficult to get hold of, though *R.* (Loderi Group) 'Loderi King George' AGM, with its richly scented, white, lily-like flowers, is one of the best known and available from a number of nurseries.

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The rock garden was originally a scree planting of delicate alpinines. During the period of neglect, the shrubs became dominant, with a dramatic spring display of acers and azaleas. The team is now starting to reintroduce more alpinines and bulbs.

The details

Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens, Brighton Road, Lower Beeding, Horsham, West Sussex, RH13 6PP; leonardsleegardens.co.uk

Open: RHS Partner Garden, open daily, with free access for members July–September and December–February.

Size: 40ha (100 acres) of gardens, woodland and lakes. A further 57ha (140 acres) is deer park.

Access: Hard paths throughout much of the gardens make them accessible for wheelchairs. See website for more details.

Maintenance: nine gardeners, two gardener apprentices and three tree surgeons keep on top of pruning and tree work in winter, as well as new planting. Another key job is managing the lake to maintain water levels, control pondweed and stabilise the banks, together with planting up the margins and islands.



Head Gardener Jamie Harris

There are six lakes within the gardens and deer park, all created at different times. Engine Pond (right) was created between 1852 and 1874 to power the pump that moved water up to the top part of the garden.



Packed with colour from azaleas and rhododendrons (above), the hard paths make much of Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens accessible.



‘The eye-popping displays of rhododendrons, camellias and towering evergreens are as impressive as they ever were.’

Glorious once again

Restored and given space to breathe, the eye-popping displays of rhododendrons, camellias and towering evergreens are as impressive as they ever were. Glassy lakes reflect magnificent mature plants and the wallabies, introduced by Edmund Loder, have returned – as have delighted locals, many of whom had visited with their parents and grandparents.

With the heavy slog of the reopening complete, the gardens team is now expanding its horizons, and getting its teeth into further improvements. ‘Many plants have not been pruned for 10–15 years, or even longer, and need careful renovation to let light in,’ says Jamie. ‘Due to the changes of ownership, hybridization experiments and neglect, there are also a lot of unlabelled and unknown cultivars, so getting on top of the plant labelling is a priority.’

The newly remeasured champion trees have become part of a garden trail, and the Loderi rhododendron hybrids are due to be registered as a Plant Heritage National Plant Collection. The team here continue to open up new areas, too – such as the bluebell-filled Top Garden, which is set in a steep-sided valley with a stream running through it. Meanwhile, grand plans are afoot to improve the all-year-round offering.

‘We are a strong spring garden and good in autumn, so we are working on summer and winter, encouraging wildflowers and making the most of the lakes and the wildlife,’ says Jamie. ‘The idea is to create pockets of interest to draw visitors around, and make these the best gardens they can be.’ ●

Resources

Most plants mentioned here are listed online at rhs.org.uk/findaplant

For details of news and events at other RHS Partner Gardens, turn to pp121–126