

LONDON'S SECRET GARDENS

In the summer months, nothing could be better to escape the bustle of the city than a tranquil garden. We take a look at the capital's hidden gems

London is blessed with many green spaces, with the likes of Hampstead Heath and Hyde Park providing welcome respite from urban life. But they're no secret to the thousands of tourists that descend on the city, and sometimes something off-the-beaten-track is called for.

The capital's hidden spaces are certainly varied. While there are plenty of your typical English country gardens, some take their inspiration from around the world, while others take you into a surreal nature reserve just minutes away from the traffic-choked streets.

Taking its inspiration from the sub-continent, the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens have installed an Indian landscape on the museum's West Lawn. You can stroll through the rocky Himalayan Mountains to the tropical environs of southern India, past poppies, mango, bamboo and lotus.

For the kids, there is Coram's Fields where sheep and geese stroll around in a green oasis. On the site of the original Foundling Hospital established 1739, the playground still has part of the colonnaded Georgian buildings as a backdrop. Adults must be accompanied by a child to be allowed in.

Postman's Park, near to St Paul's Cathedral, is not exactly your average garden and is an intriguing place. It is home to the Watts Memorial, which pays tribute to ordinary people who died saving others. The work of Victorian artist and philanthropist, George Watts, each beautiful Royal Doulton tile offers an intriguing snippet of a tale of the unfortunate circumstances in which these heroes died. They include a man leaping from a Thames steamboat to rescue a child in 1874, and the heroes of the Windsor Express who died in 1898 trying to save the train.

Over on the South Bank, Red Cross Garden was established in 1887 by Octavia Hill, founder of the National Trust, to provide some relief to the inhabitants of overcrowded Bankside. Much was lost in the 1950s but it has since been restored and filled with 19th Century plants. Highlights include an English cottage garden, an exotic shrub and herbaceous border, rocky planting and pond garden. If you fancy getting into gardening but lack your own green space, you can volunteer here.

Also, don't dismiss some of the better-known green spaces when looking for peace and tranquillity. While Holland Park is hardly a 'secret garden', there are plenty of areas where you can hide away with a good book. Peacocks stroll the grounds and an afternoon in the Japanese-style Kyoto Garden – looking at the impressive planting reflected in the ponds – will have you ready to face the city crowds again.

Other hidden-away green spaces in the capital include the Phoenix Garden in the heart of the West End, which was built on the site of a car park nearly 25 years ago by the local community. A slice of





countryside in the middle the city, the garden claims to have the West End's only frogs as well as chilli plants and hundreds of wildflowers.

You can combine your love of gardens with a leisurely coffee stop. Head to Rococo's retreat on Motcomb Street, where you can pop in for a drink and sample the chocolate-maker's range in a Moroccan-inspired courtyard surrounded by rose, geranium, jasmine, mint and lavender – all ingredients used by Rococo.

Those interested in the medical use of plants can find out more at the Chelsea Physic Garden, which was founded in 1673 by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries. Today, you can wander past the pharmaceutical beds, finding out which plants are used in the likes of cardiology and psychiatry, or take a look at how different cultures use plants in the Garden of World Medicine. Particularly charming is afternoon tea on the terrace, where you feel a million miles away from London.

If you want to visit a number of gardens in a day and learn something about the history of the area they are in, the London Parks & Gardens Trust has a number of self-guided walks and cycle rides on its website (www.londongardenstrust.org/guides/). Here you can download audio guides for your MP3 player. A walk though Fulham, for example, will take you through Furnivall Gardens, a pretty space on the site of what was once an area for a considerable fishing industry. The walk also takes in the likes of St Peter's Square. Laid out in 1825 and surrounded by villas, it used to be private but can now be enjoyed by all.

And for those looking to really get up on their garden history, check out the unique Garden Museum, which is housed in the old church of St Mary-at-Lambeth. It is a fitting place for such a museum as the tomb of the Tradescant family, "plant hunters" and gardeners to Charles I, is in the churchyard. Outside the museum, you'll find a 17th Century style knot garden laid with the plants that the Tradescants grew.

But if you want to visit some truly lesser known places, the National Garden Scheme should be your first port of call – the scheme opens up privately owned gardens to the public on certain days of the year and are a great way to spend an afternoon, as well as providing some inspiration to green-fingered types. Each garden charges a small admission fee, with money donated to charity.

On July 26, for instance, check out a garden in W11 packed with unusual wall shrubs and a giant 150-year-old *Euonymus japonicus*. Or see what can be done with a tiny walled patio garden over in SW12, which, despite its size, packs in a waterfall, pergola and mature trees and shrubs (21 June; 19 July).

Further info:

British Museum: 020 7323 8299

Coram's Fields: 020 7837 6138

Postman's Park: London tourist information centre 08701 566 366

Red Cross Garden: 020 7403 3393

Holland Park: 020 7471 9813

The Phoenix Garden: 020 7379 3187

Rococo: 020 7245 0993

Chelsea Physic Garden: 020 7352 5646

London Parks & Gardens Trust: 020 7839 3969

The Garden Museum: 020 7401 8865

National Garden Scheme: 01483 211535

