



# Hot stuff

The impact of climate change on the great gardens of Kent is evident in the increasing number of exotic plants being introduced to their borders

Words by Caroline Edmunds pictures by Darryl Curcher

**W**e're hearing more and more about climate change and its impact on the environment yet what does it mean for the gardens and countryside of Kent? If temperatures continue to rise and both summers and winters continue to become drier, the plants that we are used to seeing now will gradually be replaced by more exotic species.

Mediterranean plants are already commonplace and manage to overwinter, not just in sheltered spots, but in much of the south east. In fact, we can expect to see rather more exotic plants colonising not just large and small gardens, but roadside verges, fields and woodlands, too – and in the latter locations, invaders such as Himalayan balsam or the dreaded Japanese knotweed, are

We could be saying 'goodbye' to apples and pears and 'hello' to pineapples and bananas in our lush Kentish orchards

finding conditions increasingly becoming rather more to their liking.

On the bright side, tropical and sub-tropical plants bring colour, structure and drama to borders, making a change from the lovely but rather familiar soft pastel hues of cottage gardens. To get an idea of how well tropicals and exotics grow in our climes, it's worth taking a peek at how many of the gardens open to the public in Kent have experimented with a hot, tropical

or semi-exotic border.

Quentin Stark, head gardener at Hole Park Gardens, introduced a new exotic border last year at this Rolvenden-based garden. In a south-facing bed, backed

by a brick wall, there is now a wide variety of impressive tropical plants, from bananas to giant grasses. Colour is important; the muted orange of brugmansia contrast with vibrant orange cannas, while striking Salvia



guaranitica 'Black and Blue' displays its outstanding deep blue flowers with almost black sepals. This blends perfectly with the orange petals and the pink, orange and purple striped leaves of the Canna Durban.

Shape and colour at the beginning of the autumn season is provided by the spectacular, blue potato-like flowers and yellowish green or orangish egg-shaped fruits of the *Solanum laciniatum* or Kangaroo Apple and the *Hedychium gardnerianum*, a rare tropical ginger, gives huge inflorescences of bright golden yellow and scarlet stamens.

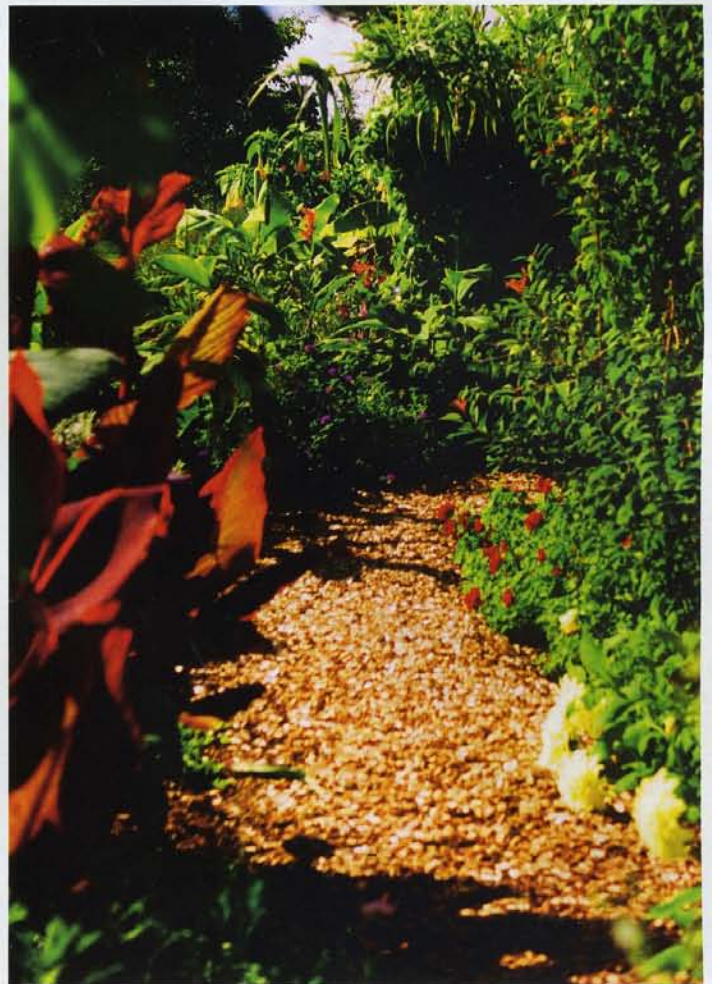
Even the traditional grounds of Leeds Castle, near Maidstone, include a sub-tropical garden where terracing provides shelter for otherwise less than hardy plants. The Lady Baillie Garden, named after the flamboyant owner of the castle in the 1930s, includes such gems as mimosa, pomegranate, vines and hedychium (ginger).

Great Comp Garden at Platt, near Borough Green, is a quirky garden where the owners have 'built' a number of charming ruins and follies. It is also a respected plantsman's garden with numerous plantings of exotics, including in woodlands. There's even the odd Australian 'bottlebrush' tree (callistemon).

If you like to know where the more unusual shrubs and flowers come from, take a trip to the Lullingstone World Garden of Plants at Eynsford. Made famous after its creator, Tom Hart-Dyke, was captured in South America while hunting orchids, and since then the subject of two TV series, this is a rather different way to view plants.

You'll find plants grouped within 'continents', and a few specimens from each country planted in their relevant positions. It's certainly a novel idea for a garden and a fun way to walk the world in 80 minutes!

Back to Kent, and it could soon be 'goodbye' to apples and pears and 'hello' to pineapples and bananas in our lush orchards. An intriguing idea this might be, but I think we'd rather miss the drifts of spring blossom. ■



#### *Stipa tenuissima* - Feather grass

A compact, perennial grass, this has lots of close-packed, stiff, thread-like stems forming a strongly horizontal shape 60cm (2ft) tall. In summer, plants are covered with masses of elegant, pale feathery seed-heads. Likes a sunny, well-drained spot and associates well with compact alstroemerias, rock plants and other grasses that enjoy similar conditions.



#### *Eupatorium cannabinum* - Hemp agrimony

A lovely wildflower, this is very attractive to bees and butterflies. Its purple, pink or white blooms are produced from summer to early autumn.

Perfect for the back of the border or in a wild garden, it thrives in moist soil.

#### *Dahlia 'Art Deco'* - Dahlia

'Art Deco' belies the myth that dahlias are big and brassy. Growing to only 90cm (3ft) tall, it's perfect for the front of the border or containers. Try it with fellow variety, 'Art Nouveau'.

#### *Galtonia candicans* - Galtonia

Often called the Summer Hyacinth, although not so fragrant and much more impressive when grown in bold groups, either on their own or tucked among large herbaceous plants in a border. Plant the bulbs deeply and leave them undisturbed, just covering them for winter protection; they may also be lifted or kept in large pots for patio display.

For details of the gardens mentioned in this article, visit: [www.kent-life.co.uk](http://www.kent-life.co.uk) and click on 'links.'