

# Pomp and circumstance

Want to know where to see rhododendrons and azaleas in the Weald? Follow our guide for the best places to view 'the royalty of the garden'

Words by Caroline Edmunds pictures by Darryl Curcher



**W**hile some garden enthusiasts may prefer subtle colourings of blues, pinks and pastels in their borders, others prefer a vibrant showiness to offer a full 'wow' impact. And azaleas certainly deliver this during this month.

A smaller cousin of the rhododendron and in many ways very similar, azaleas are sometimes called 'the royalty of the garden' because of their elegant flowers, and the way they provide pomp and circumstance in the floral world.

With over 10,000 cultivars developed over hundreds of years, the range of shades is enormous, from gentlest whites to acid yellows or deepest burgundies. And the effect is all the more impressive, as azalea flowers tend to open all at once, covering each shrub in a solid mass of blooming, sometimes scented and giving colour for up to two months in our gardens and woodlands.

There are several gardens around Kent noted for their displays of azaleas and rhododendrons and each setting is slightly different, demonstrating how the shrubs can act as a backdrop, centrepiece or a foreground.

A clump of such gardens centres around Sevenoaks. National Trust-owned Emmetts Garden at Ide Hill, noted for its exceptional views over the Weald of Kent, has magnificent displays of Ghent azaleas on its woodland slopes as well as Mollis azaleas in the South garden and a more formal showing on the terrace. A rare double-flowering Ghent azalea, *Rhododendron Van Houtte Klore Pleno*, thought to have been lost forever, was rediscovered a few years ago in

a previously overgrown part of the grounds.

Less well known is Chart Edge Gardens, near Westerham. This 10-acre site, in private ownership, has a special dell garden where camellias and magnolias complement the stunning rhododendrons and azaleas which are underplanted with bog plants. The gardens used only to open under the National Gardens Scheme, but now open two days a week as well.

Spectacular hillside settings display azaleas to full effect at Riverhill House, where the flowering of the shrubs comes hot on the heels of a multitude of bluebells and later, Japanese maples take over the colourfest.

Over at Great Comp Garden in the village of Platt, magnolias again are used to complement the rhododendrons and azaleas in this plantsman's haven.

Heading south in the county, we find azaleas planted to create the

foreground in the Picturesque-designed garden at Scotney Castle, with the eye drawn past their rich colour scheme down to the focal point of the ruined castle itself and up again to the fields in the background. As visitors brush past the bushes, they catch the rich perfumes of some of the varieties planted by the paths.

But for more informal settings, azalea enthusiasts need to travel further south, stopping at Bedgebury Pinetum where The Glory Hole is especially dedicated to many cultivars of azalea and rhododendron. The strong yet tranquil backdrop of conifers and exotic trees sets the loud blossoms off perfectly.

A woodland glade is also the setting at Hole Park Gardens near Rolvenden. Here the visitor

is startled to come out of a formal walled garden and down a grassy path, to be suddenly confronted by an immense bank of flowers in shades of scarlet, orange, yellow and purple.

With so many opportunities to appreciate these regal shrubs in a variety of settings, there won't be any excuses for equating them with the invasive, mauve flowered monster, (*Rhododendron ponticum*), that is, sadly, many people's sole idea of a rhododendron or azalea.

From gentlest whites to acid yellows and deepest burgundies, the range of shades is enormous



### Where to see rhododendrons and azaleas in the Weald

#### Hole park Gardens, near Rolvenden

20 May - Rhododendron Sunday  
One of the garden's most picturesque features, the standard wisterias, are in full flower as are the colourful display of rhododendrons around the gardens and throughout the woodland walk and Dell.  
Tel: 01580 241344.

Emmetts Garden, Ide Hill, Sevenoaks  
Tel: 01732 751509 (infoline).

Charts Edge Gardens, Hosey Hill,  
Westerham

Tel: 01959 565541 (weekdays)/01732 504556 (evenings and weekends).

Riverhill House, Sevenoaks  
Tel: 01732 458802 / 452557

Great Comp Gardens, Platt,  
Borough Green  
Tel: 01732 886154.

Scotney Castle Gardens & Estate,  
Lamberhurst  
Tel: 01892 891081.

Bedgebury Forest & Pinetum,  
near Goudhurst  
Tel: 01580 211781.

