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Winter Wonderlands

With winter on its way, Newmarket garden designer Melanie Taylor shares some enchanting local gardens guaranteed to bring joy on dreary days



Hemingford Manor
Pictures: Hazelwood Plantscapes

The Manor at Hemingford Grey

Writing about her garden in *A Stranger at Green Knowe*, author Lucy M. Boston penned: "Even from the house, only tempting glimpses could be seen through the trees. The flower beds were designed in a pattern but not strictly. The patterns led to escapes, to odd corners, to unexpected walks..."

Brought to life in her classic *Green Knowe* books, the author's garden at Hemingford Grey does indeed lead you on unexpected walks and into odd corners. You're immediately struck by the magnificent yew topiary, first planted as tiny seedlings by Lucy shortly after buying the house in 1939. Clipped into crowns, orbs and a dove for the late Queen Elizabeth's coronation, these superb dark evergreens are equally enthralling today.

I love the juxtaposition between the formality of the topiary and the rambunctious nature of the planting elsewhere in the garden. Even as autumn marches on, the borders are in full colour, with vibrant cosmos, asters, salvias and plumes of grasses and teasels swaying gently in the breeze. Today's naturalistic planting echoes Lucy's gardening philosophy: "My approach to gardening is to find out how the garden would like to be – what wants to grow where. My chief pleasure in it is the interplay of sun and shadow among trees and on the face of the house."

We were treated to different views at every turn and had fun looking for elements of the stories as we wandered through the magical gardens. Built by the Normans



Docwra's Manor

in 1130, the house holds more than 900 years of history within its walls. Lucy's daughter-in-law, Diana Boston, conducts pre-arranged tours of her house which she took on after Lucy's death in 1990.

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Open daily from 11am-5pm. See greenknowe.co.uk

Docwra's Manor, Shepreth

Opposite the war memorial, a pair of wrought iron gates reveal a charming garden. A huge wisteria frames the door of the Queen Anne façade, which sits on the front of the original 17th century farmhouse.

Once the childhood home of gardener and writer Sarah Raven, Docwra's Manor was bought by her parents John and

Faith when they married in 1954. The house initially came with one and a half acres, and the pair set about creating the gardens outwards from the house as and when their plant collection grew, eventually adding an additional acre.

Evolving in stages, the cottage garden is a series of hidden rooms, its narrow winding paths obscuring the view around the next corner.

I met Faith's grandson, Anthony, who describes his grandfather John, a Classics Fellow at King's, as being "a rather keen botanist" and says that: "Whilst the garden is at its best in May, there will certainly be things of interest to enjoy in the winter months, as my grandfather planned for successional colour."

The joy of this garden is that despite being open to the public, it's still very much a family garden; you can see and feel the love and care that's gone into it. Anthony sums up the planting as "an exuberant abundance".

There's a sense that whilst the planting doesn't conform to a design, things grow exactly where they were intended. As Faith expresses it: "The garden designer, though not entirely ousted, has had to yield pride of place to the plantsman."

With industrious allotments and greenhouses, it's very much a working garden, and being the only visitor, I enjoyed a private glimpse into the workings of it. Walking through the walled garden, the potting shed stood almost as though it was frozen in time, the seedlings and tools lying on the bench exactly where the gardeners had left them ready to return to them



ABOVE & LEFT: Easton Lodge Italian Garden BELOW: Cambridge University Botanic Garden



tomorrow. If choosing a favourite spot, I'd say I loved the way the late afternoon sun fell through the trees in the orchard, their shadows dancing on the grass beneath. The garden has a wonderful sense of longevity; indeed, the cyclamens in the temple garden were the couple's wedding present and still thrive 70 years on.

Open every Wednesday and Friday from 10am-4pm and on the first Sunday of each month from 2-4pm. Admission is £5. The garden is partly wheelchair accessible and has an accessible WC, but note some of the pathways are too narrow for wheelchairs. See docwrasmanorgarden.co.uk

Bridge End Garden, Saffron Walden

Sheltering in the Fry Gallery on a cold day led to a surprise as I discovered the entrance to the Bridge End Garden. Previously owned by the Fry's Chocolate family and now managed by Saffron Walden Town Council, the once-private late Regency and early Victorian garden is laid out in a geometric pattern over seven acres hidden in the heart of the town. There's a formal Dutch garden, a rose garden, a wilderness and a yew hedge maze. I especially liked the structure and formality of the Dutch garden with its impressive topiary parterre. Open all year round except Christmas Day, volunteers manage the garden at weekends, so opening times may vary.

The Maze is closed from Christmas to Easter and also for a few days in late summer for hedge trimming. It may also shut in autumn if there's too much rain, so check before visiting.

See bridgeendgarden.org

Gardens of Easton Lodge, Little Easton, Great Dunmow

Renowned for its snowdrop display, the gardens of Easton Lodge are the work of famous Edwardian garden designer Harold Peto. The former home of Daisy, Countess of Warwick, the gardens are now managed by a group of trustees and volunteers. There's an impressive sunken Italian garden complete with balustraded lilypond and Edwardian-style planting, a walled kitchen garden, a tree-lined glade and a reconstruction of Peto's original treehouse in the Lime Walk.

A fascinating archive room contains reams of documents, photographs and historical artefacts found by the gardeners so allow plenty of time to visit.

Open every Thursday and one Sunday a month from April to October 31. Check the website for February snowdrop days. See eastonlodge.co.uk

Cambridge University Botanic Garden

The Winter Garden at the Botanic Garden really comes into its own as the year draws to a close. The winter flowering

shrubs burst into colour and the fragrant pink *Daphne bholua* 'Jaqueline Postill' captivates your senses, so lovely is its sweet perfume.

Stunning trees such as the paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*) and the Tibetan cherry (*Prunus serrula*) are pretty foils to the multi-hued drift planting – a bold injection of colour to cheer any winter's day.

The winter sun is itself an important feature, with the garden having been deliberately built with one bank higher than the other. As the sun moves across the garden, the shrubs on one side become backlit and put on a dazzling display for visitors. Of course, if it's really cold you can always warm up in the tropical glasshouses!

Open year-round. Admission applies. See botanic.cam.ac.uk

Clients often ask me for winter colour in their designs, so winter garden visits are a great source of inspiration. Fighting the urge to stay inside my warm studio, I embrace the cold air on a sunny morning, and the opportunity to dawdle and watch the setting sun on a winter's afternoon. The gardens featured will brighten your day whatever the weather, so why not wrap up warm and explore these wonderful winter spaces? There's no better way to idle away an hour or two. And if it's good for you, it's hardly idling, is it?

If you'd like help choosing plants for winter colour and scent for your garden, reach out to Melanie by emailing melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk or via the contact form on her website hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk