

The 50 Best Garden Centres

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A great nursery combines well-informed staff, specialist stock and a good atmosphere. Kate Watson-Smyth discovers Britain's best bases for the green-fingered.

This week's panel:

Dorothy McClean is the owner of Flower + Garden (flowerandgarden.co.uk);

Anna Rose Hughes is a graduate of The English Garden School and a garden designer;

Anna Pavord is the gardening columnist for the Independent's Saturday Magazine;

Victoria Summerley is an executive editor of The Independent and edits the Saturday edition of i. She opens her garden in London as part of the National Garden Scheme (victoriasbackyard.blogspot.com)

LONDON & SOUTH

1. Alleyn Park

"This charming garden centre tucked away in West Dulwich may be small, but the plants are well chosen, the staff extremely helpful, and the collection of gifts and gardeners' accessories delightful," says Anna Rose. "Also, if you sign up to the mailing list, a regular newsletter of inspiring hints arrives in your inbox."

Where: 77 Hall Road, London, SE21 8ES (020 8670 7788; alleynpark.co.uk)

2. Wisley Plant Centre RHS

"Superb quality, as you'd expect from the Royal Horticultural Society's own garden centre, with the emphasis firmly on plants rather than seasonal tat," says Anna. "Magnificent magnolias and fabulous ferns – choose from 9,000 different delights and next door is the best gardening bookstore in the world."

Where: RHS, Wisley, Woking, Surrey, GU23 6QB (01483 21111; rhs.org.uk/wisleyplantcentre)

3. Clifton Nurseries

"London's oldest, and swankiest, garden centre," says Anna. "Garden design, landscaping, management, they do it all. Vintage furniture, stylish pots and plants. At a price."

Where: 5a Clifton Villas, London W9 2PH (020 7289 6851; clifton.co.uk)

4. World's End Nurseries

Standing on an acre of land, the oldest of Chelsea's nurseries occupies a site used for hundreds of years as a thriving garden, says Dorothy. "Today it offers a calm and slightly quirky green oasis at the end of the bustling King's Road in London. Pick your way through the eclectic mix of plants and pots artfully arranged around the meandering pathways, making it more like a visit to a secret garden than a walk through a garden centre. Indoor and outdoor plants fight for space with garden statuary, planters, benches and even the odd gazebo."

Where: 441-457 King's Road, London SW10 0LR (020 7352; worldsendnurseries.com)

5. RHS Hyde Hall

Expansive is the feeling you get from Hyde Hall from the moment you pull up in the newly landscaped car park, says Dorothy. Set atop a hill, the house and gardens are very exposed and the planting is carefully selected to ensure that the "right plant right place" principles are applied and the plants thrive. Using this experience, the nursery is stocked with an excellent selection of high-quality plants suitable for drier, poorer soils. "Top it all with a delicious light lunch or tea in the tea garden and make it a day out."

Where: Creep hedge Lane, Rettendon, Chelmsford, Essex, CM3 8ET (0845 265 807; rhs.org.uk/Gardens/Hyde-Hall)

6. Great Dixter

"The nursery attached to this fabulous garden – the legacy of the late, great Christopher Lloyd – offers a chance to recreate some of Great Dixter's exciting plant schemes," says Anna Rose. "It's particularly good for unusual herbaceous plants and a wide variety of clematis. There is also a lovely little cafe and gift shop."

Where: Northiam, Rye, East Sussex, TN31 6PH (01797 252878; greatdixter.co.uk)

7. Neal's Nurseries

"My local must get a mention for its sheer ability to produce exactly what I am looking for whenever I'm looking for it," says Dorothy. "And I can be a tricky customer." Nestled on the northern tip of Wandsworth Common, you'll find every conceivable container, plant, plant accessory, gardening tool, gardening gift and more in this well laid-out garden centre. And if you can't find it, helpful staff will make sure they bend over backwards to get it for you.

Where: Heathfield Road, Wandsworth, London SW18 2PH (020 8874 2037; capitalgardensgroup.co.uk)

8. Penwood Nurseries

"With an enormously broad stock, much of which is grown on site, Penwood is a family enterprise headed by Douglas Harris, a terrific plantsman whose enthusiasm has rubbed off on his staff," says Anna Rose. "With the hugely diverse variety of trees, shrubs and perennials, it is almost impossible to leave empty-handed."

Where: The Drove, Penwood, Newbury, Berkshire, RG20 9EW (01635 254366; penwoodnurseries.co.uk)

9. Thompsons Plant and Garden Centre

This family-run group of garden centres covers five retail sites in Kent and the South-East, and specialises in growing its own stock. So proud are they of the provenance of the plants that a three-year guarantee is offered, says Anna Rose.

Where: Stone Street, Petham, Kent, CT4 5PW (01227 700449; thompsons-plants.co.uk)

10. Waterperry Gardens

"Founded in the 1930s as a school of horticulture for ladies, the ornamental gardens are well worth a look before perusing the delights of the attached garden centre," says Anna Rose. It is particularly good for alpinists, and most of the plants on sale are grown on site.

Where: Waterperry, nr Wheatley, Oxfordshire, OX33 1JZ (01844 339226; waterperrygardens.co.uk)

MIDLANDS & EAST

11. Barnsdale Gardens

If it's inspiration you're after, an unusual plant specimen or a delicious cup of tea, Barnsdale Gardens is a perfect destination, says Dorothy. "The extensive gardens, feature different design styles and innovative use of plants. The nursery, much of which is grown on site off cuttings from the gardens, offers good value and many rare specimens. My special treat is a bag of fresh, Barnsdale windfall apples"

Where: The Avenue, Exton, Oakham, Rutland, LE15 8AH (01572 813200; barnsdalegardens.co.uk)

12. Woottens Plants

"Set up by the charismatic Michael Loftus, who used to own Neals Yard wholefoods shop in Covent Garden," says Anna. "His aim was to have plants so beautiful and so beautifully grown (iris are a speciality) that customers would drive hundreds of miles out of their way to buy them. And they do."

Where: Wenhaston, Halesworth, Suffolk, IP19 9HD (01502 478258; woottensplants.co.uk)

13. Burford Garden Company

"Burford has everything you could want for your garden – and home – from buildings and chicken houses, to tools, lights and furniture, set off by a carefully selected range of plants," says Anna Rose.

Where: Shilton Road, Burford, Oxfordshire, OX18 4PA (01993 823117; burford.co.uk)

14. The Beth Chatto Gardens

Another must from Victoria. An overgrown wasteland with poor soil and boggy hollows has been transformed into an informal garden. There's lots of advice on which plants are suitable for your particular issues as well as a tea room and workshops to attend.

Where: Elmstead Market, Colchester, Essex, CO7 7DB (01206 822007; bethchatto.co.uk)

15. Harvey's Garden Plants

"The Orchard Room at the heart of the nursery is a winner of foodie awards, making the nursery worth a visit just for lunch," says Dorothy. "Combine good food with a Chelsea award-winning collection of rare shade and woodland plants and a trip to Suffolk is a necessity. Look out for its talks and practical sessions, they are well worth attending."

Where: Great Green, Thurston, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, IP31 3SJ (01359 233363; harveysgardenplants.co.uk)

16. Reads Nursery

Small family-run business offering a huge selection of plants and fruit trees most of which they have propagated themselves. Pride themselves on environmentally-friendly methods - recycled boxes for delivery, peat-free compost and predators against pests.

Where: Buy online and collect or arrange delivery from the farm in Bungay, Suffolk (01986 895555; readsnursery.co.uk)

17. The Plant Centre

This is the national centre for horticulture and has been teaching and training for 60 years. While the selection of plants isn't huge, the advice available is second to none and they do have very good sales as well as lots of inspiration. The students will also visit your garden (if you live locally) and come up with suggestions and design ideas for you. Holds the national collections of Penstemons and Philadelphus.

Where: Evesham Road, Pershore, Worcestershire, WR11 4RJ (01386 551149)

18. Cotswold Garden Flowers

"Owned by the pleasingly combative ex-schoolmaster Bob Brown, who gives plants in his nursery marks of ten," says Anna. "Teacher's pets are spurges and asters, bellflowers and geraniums. There is also a good collection of spiky agaves."

Where: Sands Lane, Badsey, Evesham, Worcestershire, WR1 7EZ (01386 422829; cgf.net)

19. Scotsdales

Good range of grasses and bamboos here as well as olive trees of all sizes with lots of clear information about caring for them. Rated for its wide paths which are easy to navigate and the fact that a large portion of the site can be covered on a rainy day.

Where: 120 Cambridge Road, Great Shelford, Cambridge, CB22 5JT (01223 842777; scotsdalegardencentre.co.uk)

20. Emcy's

"A place that welcomes both me and my pooch – perfect," says Dorothy. "Emcy's is a rare find: a large, independent garden centre with every conceivable plant and garden accoutrement; staff who go out of their way to make your visit a memorable one; and most importantly, not happy with the price? They're ready to listen to reasonable offers." The grow your own page on its website offering advice and gardening tips is worth keeping an eye on for sensible, monthly updates.

Where: Weybourne Rd, Kelling, Holt, Norfolk, NR25 7ER (01263 711574; emcy.co.uk)

21. Grange Farm Nursery

Extremely helpful and knowledgeable plantswomen run this nursery near Malvern. It specialises in camellias which can be fussy flowers. There is no cafe or gift shop as this place prides itself on being a proper nursery for proper gardeners. If you want a water feature go somewhere else.

Where: Guarlford, Malvern, Worcestershire, WR13 6NT (01684 562544)

SOUTH WEST

22. CW Groves & Son Ltd

"Winners of the Greatest Garden Centre Team (mid-sized) 2011 and no wonder," says Anna. "Charlie Groves is the sixth generation to run this brilliant family business. Compost, seeds, chicken feed, turf, roses, water features, pots, bedding plants – everything you'd expect in a local garden centre, but with the best help and service you'll find."

Where: West Bay Rd, Bridport, Dorset, DT6 4BA (01308 422654; grovesnurseries.co.uk)

23. Thorngrove Garden Centre

"You can be sure of a warm welcome here and the plants are just as well looked after," says Dorothy. Mostly grown on site by a team of 25 disabled people who work alongside a team of mentoring staff and volunteers. "This is a gardeners' nursery and although they pride themselves on being purely that, they would like a coffee shop to encourage customers to linger."

Where: Common Mead Lane, Gillingham, Dorset, SP8 4RE (01747 822242)

24. Jekka's Herb Farm

"This organic herb farm has to be included," says Victoria. There are over 650 varieties of rare and tropical species among its collection of culinary, aromatic, decorative and medicinal herbs. The farm celebrates its silver jubilee in April and is the only organic nursery with more than 60 RHS gold medals.

Where: Rose Cottage, Shellards Lane, Alveston, Bristol, BS35 3SY (jekkasherbfarm.com)

25. Edwin Tucker & Sons

"Established as seed merchants in 1831, the firm supplies more than 100 kinds of seed potato and nearly 200 varieties of other vegetables, flowers and green manures," says Anna. All seed is produced organically.

Where: Brewery Meadow, Stonepark, Ashburton, Newton Abbot, Devon, TQ13 7DG (01364 652233; edwintucker.com)

26. Rosemoor

As with all the RHS gardens, a visit to Rosemoor is a fantastic day out, says Anna Rose. "The extensive gardens are backed up by a packed plant centre, filled with the best the garden has to offer and manned by knowledgeable, helpful staff."

Where: Great Torrington, Devon, EX38 8PH (0845 265 8072; rhs.org.uk/gardens/rosemoor)

27. Burncoose Nurseries

"There is an enormous range of plants here, many of which can be seen in its woodland garden," says Anna. "Its links to the Caerhays estate, home to a national collection of magnolias, means it has a good selection of these, as well as camellias and rhododendrons."

Where: Gwennap, Redruth, Cornwall, TR16 6BJ (01209 860316; burncoose.co.uk)

28. Knoll Gardens

Knoll Gardens unfolds into a showcase for plants, especially the grasses that form the basis of the nursery's offering, says Dorothy. If they don't have the specimen you're after, they'll have a reason why not and offer to find it for you if it can be found. "Knowledgeable and hands-on nurserymen and women and Neil Lucas, owner and acclaimed authority on ornamental grass, will advise you on how to

incorporate naturalistic grasses into your planting scheme. The small tea room offers a good cuppa but if you just want a quiet place to sit and contemplate the opportunities presented by grasses, you'll find a bench or pair of chairs around just about every corner.

Where: Hampreston, Wimborne, BH21 7ND (01202 873931; knollgardens.co.uk)

29. Tregothnan Estate

As the largest historic botanic garden in Cornwall, the privately owned Tregothnan Estate, although not strictly a garden centre, deserves a mention, says Dorothy. "Its range of plants, many of which are rare, is grown on the estate and is continuously being extended to meet the demand for locally grown, high quality British plants and there is expert advice and guidance over the phone or by email." Visit by appointment only.

Where: tregothnan.co.uk

NORTH

30. Bridgemere Nursery and Garden World

"This garden centre group encompasses 128 individually branded garden centres around the country, including this one, Wyvale and Blooms of Bressingham," says Anna Rose. The website has a search engine to find your local garden centres, as well as advice, online ordering and a plant-finding service.

Where: Bridgemere, nr Nantwich, Cheshire (01270 521100; thegardencentregroup.co.uk)

31. Barton Grange

This winner of the 2012 Garden Centre of the Year award is part of a family-run group of three plant nurseries, a hotel and a landscaping business. There is a vast range of stock and the outdoor plant area has a roof that closes when it rains.

Where: Gartstang Road, Brock, Preston, PR3 ORB (01995 642900; bartongrange.co.uk)

32. Bluebell Cottage Gardens

When Sue Beesley won BBC Gardener of the Year in 2006, it gave her the confidence to run her own nursery, says Victoria. "Open from April to September, the gardens, which run alongside the Trent and Mersey canal towpath, boast a potager, a grasses garden and orchard while the nursery is crammed with locally grown plants, many of which have been propagated by Sue herself." Tearoom and parking.

Where: Lodge Lane, Dutton, nr Warrington, Cheshire, WA4 4HP (01928 713718; lodgelanenursery.co.uk)

33. Grosvenor Garden Centre

This is an emporium of all things garden-related, including upmarket furniture, accessories and, of course, plants, says Anna Rose. It often receives the Garden Centre of Excellence award, plus it hosts a regular farmer's market and has a fantastic locally sourced food shop and café.

Where: Wrexham Road, Belgrave, Chester, CH4 9EB (01244 625200; grosvenorgardencentre.co.uk)

34. Larch Cottage Nurseries

Owned by landscape designer Peter Stott, the garden at Larch Cottage is an inspiration, while the nursery offers the means to replicate its charm, says Anna Rose. Anna Pavord calls it a place of pilgrimage for plantaholics who love rare and unusual shrubs, trees, dwarf conifers and Japanese maples.

Where: Melkinthorpe, Penrith, Cumbria, CA10 2DR (01931 712404; larchcottage.co.uk)

35. Homebase

"Catch the plants on their delivery day and you will seldom find better value, I have heard one renowned garden designer declare of their local Homebase," says Dorothy. "The buyers do an excellent job of stocking relevant, seasonal plants alongside the perennial favourites."

Where: nationwide (0845 077 8888; homebase.co.uk)

36. Wentworth Garden Centre

Just off the M1, this family-owned independent nursery is one of the largest in Yorkshire. "The setting alone makes shopping here a pleasure, with the extensive gardens of Wentworth Woodhouse as a backdrop," says Dorothy. "The garden centre is constructed in the former Kitchen, Italian and Japanese gardens of the estate. Wentworth focuses on plants – good quality at affordable prices – and the well informed staff support this philosophy."

Where: Hague Lane, Wentworth, Rotherham, South Yorkshire, S62 7TF (01226 744842; wentworthgardencentre.co.uk)

37. Harlow Carr

Dominated by water and stone, Harlow Carr is very much part of its Yorkshire surroundings but its gardeners seek to push the boundaries with unusual, and sometimes unexpected, planting. The library has one of the best collections of modern books on gardening.

Where: Crag Lane, Harrogate, North Yorkshire, HG3 1UE (01423 565418; rhs.org.uk/gardens/harlow-carr)

38. Halls of Heddon

"Halls have never lost faith with their preferred flower – the dahlia," says Anna. "During the long years when dahlias were in outer darkness, they plugged on regardless. Now they are wildly fashionable and Halls sells all the best kinds."

Where: West Heddon Nurseries, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Northumberland, NE15 0JS (01661 852445; hallsofheddon.co.uk)

SCOTLAND

39. New Hopetoun Gardens

One of Edinburgh's best-stocked garden centres, this has been running for 30 years. The staff are all gardeners and the plants are chosen for their ability to thrive in the Scottish climate. There's fresh baking in the Orangery too.

Where: by Newton Village, West Lothian, Edinburgh, EH52 6QZ (01506 834433; newhopetoungardens.co.uk)

40. Munro's Nurseries

"The restaurant is renowned, with devotees making regular detours for the delicious home grown and produced food," says Dorothy. "They'll also tell you that their seed potatoes are beyond compare and they are the only place locally to buy your vegetable plants. A family-owned and run garden centre that delivers on every front."

Where: Bogallan, North Kessock, Inverness, IV1 3XE (01463 731210; munrosnurseries.co.uk)

41. Glendoick Garden Centre

"The Glendoick name has long been synonymous with rhododendrons," says Anna. "The garden centre is a more recent venture by the Cox family with an excellent food hall and café." From April to mid-June the famous garden is open as well.

Where: Glencarse, Perth, PH2 7NS (01738 860260; glendoick.com)

42. Melville Dobbies Garden Centre

David Barnes built Dobbies into the biggest garden centre chain in Scotland until in 2007, he sold out to Tesco, says Anna. "Dobbies centres vary in quality but this is a good one with a big garden buildings centre."

Where: Melville Nursery, Lasswade, Midlothian, EH18 1AZ (0131 6631941; dobbies.com)

43. Allium Garden Company

"A must stop for that elusive gift en route to your Scottish hideaway or a destination in itself, if you are looking for a specific plant in the Highlands," says Dorothy.

Where: Ballinluig, Pitlochry, Perthshire; PH9 0LG (01769 472358)

WALES & NORTHERN IRELAND

44. Dibleys

"Renowned worldwide for their houseplants and winners of nearly two dozen Chelsea gold medals, this is the place to buy greenery for inside rather than outside," says Victoria. "The nursery is in a 10-acre arboretum so there's a chance to take woodland walks, do some bird-watching or let the children run about. There is an official sales area but visitors are welcome to wander through the vast greenhouses.

Where: Llanelidan, Ruthin, Denbighshire LL15 2LJ (01978 790677; dibleys.com)

45. Farmyard Nurseries

Winner of six RHS gold medals, Farmyard specialises in herbaceous perennials, especially hellebores and primulas, says Victoria. "Visitors are welcome to wander around the entire three-acre site and owner Richard Bramley's one-acre woodland garden is open under the National Gardens Scheme.

Where: Llandysul, Carmarthenshire, SA44 4RL (01559 363389; farmyardnurseries.co.uk)

46. Rowallane Gardens

"A garden shop has recently opened at Rowallane, which has got to be great news given that this is a plantsman's garden," says Victoria. "It was created by the Rev John Moore in the 1860s and is now run by the National Trust. It is particularly famous for its blue Himalayan poppies, the Victorian walled garden and the rock garden wood.

Where: Saintfield, BT24 7LH (028 9751 0131)

47. Mount Stewart House and Gardens

"Wonderful, inspiring gardens laid out in the 1920s and taking advantage of the mild maritime climate," says Victoria. "The garden centre sells plants grown at Mount Stewart and on peat-free compost." This is a National Trust property so a good place for a day out with a restaurant, shop and guided tours.

Where: Portaferry Road, Newtownards, Co Down, BT22 2AD (028 4278 8387; nationaltrust.org.uk/mount-stewart)

48. Ballyrogan Nurseries

Open by appointment only, but it's nevertheless well worth a visit if you want something a little out of the ordinary, says Victoria. "Gary Dunlop specialises in herbaceous perennials, and among his interests are agapanthus and crocosmia.

Where: The Grange, Ballyrogan, Newtownards, Co Down, BT23 4SD (028 9181 0451)

49. Dickson Nurseries Ltd

The Dickson family is the oldest rose-growing dynasty in the UK," says Anna. "In the Twenties, they bred the famous salmon pink rose Shot Silk, which they followed in the Sixties with the even more popular yellow Grandpa Dickson."

Where: Milecross Road, Newtownards, Co Down (028 9181 2206; dickson-roses.co.uk)

50. Crug Farm Plants

Modern planthunters Bleddyn and Sue Wynn Jones have traversed the globe in search of many of the rare and wonderful plants in their garden on the coast of North Wales. "This is one for the gardener who is looking for something really special; a mail-order service is available for those unable to make it to the nursery" says Anna Rose.

Where: Griffith's Crossing, Caernarfon, Gwynedd, LL55 1TU (01248 670232; crug-farm.co.uk)

Link:

www.independent.co.uk/extras/indybest/house-garden/the-50-best-garden-centres-7544530.html