

# Open gardens

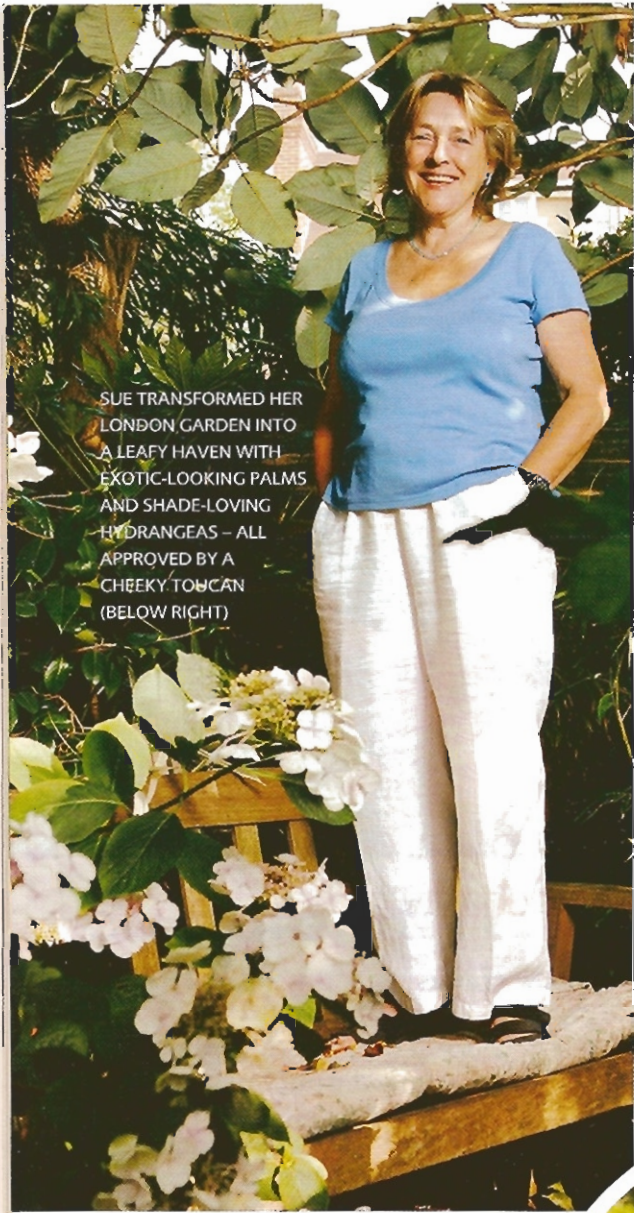
Two passionate gardeners reveal how they created their havens – and how they cope with hundreds of visitors on their charity open days! ▶

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SUE PORTER (TOP) IN LEAFY WEST LONDON. ROSAMUND DAVIES (RIGHT) AND HER WELSH VALLEY GARDEN





SUE TRANSFORMED HER LONDON GARDEN INTO A LEAFY HAVEN WITH EXOTIC-LOOKING PALMS AND SHADE-LOVING HYDRANGEAS – ALL APPROVED BY A CHEEKY TOWCAN (BELOW RIGHT)

### West London: Sue Porter

As drivers swelter on clogged roads, pollution sits heavy over west London. But turn off the highway and you are in Bedford Park, London's first garden suburb. Between the Tube and main road is Sue Porter's tranquil garden, where hydrangeas nod their drowsy heads and the sirens, horns, and planes are almost inaudible, overlaid by the mesmeric sound of water trickling in the pond.

When Sue and her husband, Chris, moved in 20 years ago, a neighbour's huge sycamore blighted the 70ft garden, which contained broken paving, a lonely holly tree and two undistinguished beds. "In the 1987 hurricane, we lost five street trees," says Sue. But it also took the sycamore – that storm cloud's silver lining.

In this garden surrounded by houses, Sue's aim was "to create privacy". In summer, with everything in full leaf, the cool, secluded space seems transplanted from the rainforest – precisely what people love when they visit it during the annual Bedford Park Festival in June.

Sue first opened her garden 10 years ago. "I inherited the job of organising the open gardens, persuading people to take part. As I was asking, the only decent thing was to participate myself." This

summer, while Chris and son James manned the garden, Sue sold tickets at the church hall. "We get feedback by earwiggling. People like the jungly feel, the coolness. It's heaven here on a sunny day."

Over the years, the garden has become more exotic. "It's easier to grow things once regarded as too tender. New Zealand natives doing well include two kauri trees and a rimu tree," says Sue, also pointing out the tendrils of a kiwi fruit vine twining through a crab apple tree.

### SMALL PATCH OF PARADISE

About 300 people come through the garden gate on a Sunday afternoon. Does having so many visitors make her feel exposed? "No, I enjoy it," says Sue. "They ask for advice and share ideas."

Although she maintains she's no expert, Sue has had some training. "James was born when I was 47 and it turned my world upside down," she says. "I left my job in television and did a part-time RHS diploma course, then a design course."

For Sue, showing her garden is a way to do something she loves and raise funds for charity – Bedford Park's open gardens raise a total of about £1,500. "Much of the proceeds go to the church," she says, "with a percentage going to a different local charity each year."

The garden is also something Sue and Chris enjoy together. But as they work full-time (Sue is a classroom assistant, Chris a history teacher), getting it ready for opening can be stressful. "A week or two before, we do all the tidying we've been putting off – and we may not be speaking!" But afterwards, stress evaporates and they reap the rewards, relaxing in their small patch of paradise.



*"People like the jungly feel, the coolness,"*





*“As it’s on a slope, children love it because they can run wild,”*

### Glamorgan: Rosamund Davies

Rosamund Davies’s garden at Slade House falls in a sweep past terraced lawns and herbaceous borders to an ancient woodland. Here, snowdrops, cyclamen, daffodils, primroses and bluebells bloom in succession beneath a canopy of trees.

This is no pocket-handkerchief patch, but a vast embroidered seven-acre quilt of a garden – the final acre recently added to create a wildflower meadow, along with 2,000 trees, including spruce, cherry and holly. From here, with the garden tumbling down the valley, you can look out beyond low, fossil-filled cliffs and across the Bristol Channel to the north Devon coast.

Built in 1852 as a holiday cottage for the Countess of Dunraven, the house – with the garden and the organic farm run by Rosamund’s husband, Peter – is on the Dnnraven Estate, perched on Wales’s Glamorgan coast. “It’s a special garden on a special site,” explains Rosamund.

“My mother died of cancer and I wanted to give something back. Raising money by opening my garden through the National Gardens Scheme was the ideal way to do it.

“I’m not a charity-coffee-morning person,” Rosamund says with a smile. “I wanted to do something active.”

The garden is open one Sunday afternoon every April, to raise funds for charities such as Macmillan Cancer Support and Marie Curie Cancer Care. Battalions of daffodils make this a spectacular season. “We have thousands

and thousands,” says Rosamund. She has help planting these bulbs (there’s a part-time gardener). But she does much of the work herself: “Except I don’t regard it as work,” she says. “I love it!”

### ENCHANTS BOTH CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Before the opening, grass is cut, borders neatened and weeds pulled. With Peter busy on the farm, it’s all down to Rosamund. On the day, there is a plant sale and an exhibition of local artists’ work in the garden room – which she describes as a “glorified shed”. Tea and cakes (baked by Rosamund and friends) are served by local Guides and Brownies.

Tucked away in its valley, the garden at Slade House is child heaven. “As it’s on a slope, children love it because they can run wild,” Rosamund says. “We’ve even made an assault course in the woods.”

But even with almost 200 visitors, it’s peaceful – enchanting adults, too, who drift along the wooded paths, bright seas of flowers at their feet. ■



ROSAMUND DOES THE LION’S SHARE OF THE GARDENING AT SLADE HOUSE, WHERE SCULPTURES (TOP LEFT) ADD AN EXTRA DRAMATIC TOUCH

**FURTHER INFORMATION** Bedford Park Festival ([www.bedfordparkfestival.org](http://www.bedfordparkfestival.org)); Macmillan Cancer Support ([www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)); Marie Curie Cancer Care ([www.mariecurie.org.uk](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk)). If you’re interested in opening your garden for charity, visit [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk). For a list of gardens open, see *The Yellow Book* (National Gardens Scheme, £7.99), available in bookshops or from the NGS website.