

Primula treasure: It's one of this country's greatest horticultural spectacles and it's happening now on our

The scampering retreat allows only the most fleeting of glimpses as, one by one, a brood of ducklings plop into the broad to form a floating island of feathery fluff that is propelled frantically by invisible feet to the tangled shelter of a half-submerged tree.

Away from the swelling ripples, sun-dappled paths twist their way back through a verdant horticultural hinterland in which sweet-scented honeysuckle azaleas and 'walls' of rhododendrons are making early flowering appearances not far from a giant gunnera that has suddenly exploded into elephantine life.

"It's amazing how quickly everything has come on," says Ian Guest, head gardener at Fairhaven Woodland and Water Garden at South Walsham and my guide for the morning. "I'd say most things are at least two weeks ahead. Just about everything you'd expect to see in late spring is out in flower at the moment..."

You don't have to be a Monty Don to see the self-evident truth in that bald and bold statement. From the swathes of bluebells to the primeval swirl of skunk cabbages everywhere you look in this glorious swamp garden full of lush new growth Nature is in a hurry.

And leading the way in this most spectacular of early spring shows is, of course, the fabulous flowering fest that is Fairhaven's annual delight, when an estimated 50,000 naturalised candelabra primulas spread their magic across a 130-acre patch of broadside Norfolk woodland in the largest and most celebrated display of its kind anywhere in the country.

Two varieties, the japonica and pulverulenta, abound here, promiscuously so in the case of the former, to scatter a kaleidoscope of colour, from pinky purple to candy-striped white and salmon pink to the traditional crimson scarlet.

Normally at their best in late May and early June, they have been spurred into action by the unusually warm weather and are thriving in the garden's peaty soil.

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The paths that criss-cross this watery haven are literally peppered with primulas.

In clumps and clusters, they pierce the luxuriant greenery, freckling and flecking bushes and dykes with their multi-tiered haloes of exuberant colour.

It is a bewitching and beguilingly beautiful display which has plainly lost none of its allure for Ian over the course of the 10 years he has spent working at Fairhaven, the last four of them as head gardener.

"There is always a genuine thrill about seeing them," he says. "From the moment you see the first ones beginning to bud and then flower in mid-spring you know you're in for a few weeks of stunning colour. And this year, they're looking as good as they've looked in some time."

But Ian's not a man to get carried away. He knows that the arrival of the primulas also signals a spell of hard graft.

"As soon as they start coming through you've a lot of work to do," he explains, "stripping out weeds and wild flowers with any height, such as docks and stingers, to make sure, come the main flowering time, they stand out as the dominant feature where ever they are."

In this annual ambition, Ian and his team, consisting of one other full-time and two part-time gardeners assisted by occasional volunteers, are guided by a determination to keep alive the spirit of the garden's creator, the 2nd Lord Fairhaven who fulfilled a dream by transforming this boggy corner of the Norfolk Broads from an overgrown woodland wilderness into a nationally-renowned horticultural haven enjoyed by around 30,000 visitors every year.

"Our brief is to maintain the gardens as Lord Fairhaven developed and left them," says Ian. "Anything we do or seek to add has to blend in and be in keeping with the woodland setting. It



When the hard work bloss

mustn't be obtrusive or out of place, whether it be a bird hide or new planting.

"It must be relevant to the kind of setting we have and we're constantly striving to keep the garden looking wild and natural, though to have that unmanaged appearance requires a surprising amount of management and an awful lot of hard work."

It is a sentiment the late Lord Fairhaven would have readily understood. Following his purchase of South Walsham Hall and its surrounding estate in the immediate aftermath of the second world war, Major Henry Broughton, as he was then, was faced by

the kind of challenge that would have cowed all but the most resolute of characters.

The house which had been used as a convalescent home during the conflict had fallen into a state of abject disrepair, while the fate of the inner broad, water garden and woodland appeared even more forlorn.

At the height of the invasion scare a veritable flotilla of pleasure boats had been scuttled in the broad and its surface strewn with barbed wire to forestall enemy flying boats landing there. Meanwhile, the water garden and ancient woodland, which had been taken over as a Home Guard training area, had grown

out of control to resemble a peculiarly British 'jungle'.

Having restored the house and taken up residence, the future 2nd Lord Fairhaven, who would inherit the family title in 1963, embarked on his life's great work, the rescue of the estate's 'lost' woodland and the establishment of a water garden to rival the best in the country.

Taking inspiration from his friend, Sir Eric Savill, who had designed the stunning woodland garden in the Windsor Great Park before the war, he adopted his own radical approach. He designed a garden that both exploited and enhanced its boggy, broadside

doorstep. Steve Snelling revels in the enduring legacy of one man's flowering passions



Pretty primulas: Main picture, Ian Guest, head gardener at Fairhaven Woodland and Water Gardens at South Walsham, surrounded by candelabra primulas in full bloom. The gardens have an estimated 50,000 naturalised candelabra primulas across a 130-acre patch of broadside Norfolk woodland.



brings with it certain difficulties.

"Working in the marshy, boggy areas can be hard at times, especially when the high tides come in and the dykes overflow," says Ian. "It means having to paddle through water, sometimes icy water, during winter and early spring, but on the plus side, the fact that it's sheltered and even gives off quite a lot of humidity at times allows you to develop things you wouldn't normally expect to see in this part of the world."

"Ultimately, you have to work with nature. You have to deal with what ever it throws at you."

In the winter that can entail weeks of struggle and frustrating delays, as occurred last December and January when a plunge in temperatures rendered impossible even the simplest of tasks.

"We couldn't clear the leaves because they'd all frozen together," says Ian. "It was really quite grim, because, unlike for most domestic gardeners, winter is actually our hardest time in terms of working in the garden. That's when we have to do so much to prepare for the coming year."

Difficult conditions or not, the work has continued just as it has done every year for the past 36 years the garden has been open to the public. In that time, Lord Fairhaven's magnificent gift has been sympathetically developed under the watchful eye of a charitable trust to include a new sensory garden, a bird hide, more boardwalks and a fresh pathway that leads through a dell to an old 'ice-hole' where supplies of shot game were once preserved.

Other innovations that help keep the garden busy and the calendar full include a new tea-room, canoe trails, ghost walks, art and photography sessions, pond-dipping and fungi forays, moth hunts and bird days.

But far and away the biggest lure remains the exceptional display of primulas.

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"They are, without question, the highlight of the year for us," says Ian. "Of course, there are other smaller plantings and features that take on their own importance throughout the year, but the garden really switches on when the primulas are all out in flower."

From time to time, more different varieties have been added to the collection, but, strangely, they have never established themselves. Ian, however, is not a man to give in easily.

"As well as needing to think about adding more colour and plantings for summer time, including possibly more hydrangeas along the dyke edges where they seem to thrive, we'll go on trying to add more varieties of primula."

Right now, to my uneducated eye, the existing display looks more than good enough. To a chorus of birdsong featuring the plaintive 'coo-coo' call of the cuckoo, I took my leave, heading off down a primula-fringed path that seemed to me the embodiment of the garden's slogan.

'Nature perfected' is what it says on the sign greeting visitors to the garden and that just about summed things up on a heavenly day of sun and shine amid the enduring evidence of one man's flowering passions.

As I drove away, the wooded waterland lost to view, I couldn't help feeling Lord Fairhaven's grand legacy was in thoroughly safe hands.

Ian Guest will lead a special primula walk at Fairhaven Woodland and Water Garden on Sunday, May 22, at 11am. The gardens, off School Road, South Walsham, can be viewed daily from 10am to 5pm with late openings until 9pm on Wednesdays and Thursdays until the end of August. Admission is £5.50 adults, £5 concessions and £3 children with free entry for under-fives. Telephone 01603 270449 or visit www.fairhavengarden.co.uk For more pictures of Fairhaven's primulas visit www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle

oms into a labour of love

setting, introducing a host of shade and water-loving plants from around the world.

Over the course of 15 years, he, together with his team of seven gardeners and two woodmen, toiled to make his dream a reality with the help of specially-built greenhouses, a tree nursery and such imports as skunk cabbages from North America, camellias and rhododendrons from the Himalayas and, most famously, a stunning array of candelabra primula which are natural to the high meadows of Asia but found an ideal home in the shaded dampness of lowland Fairhaven.

A herring-bone patterned network of mud

and weed-choked dykes was painstakingly cleared, bridges built and paths opened up to give breathing space to an historic pond that was listed as a fishery in the Domesday Book and the extraordinary King's Oak, which at 950 years old is reputedly the oldest tree in Norfolk.

In the process, Lord Fairhaven established a unique landscape in the heart of the Norfolk Broads that has been described as being "as near to a swamp garden as one can find in England" and which, since his death in 1973, has come to represent one of the region's outstanding horticultural attractions.

"It's proven to be a great legacy," says Ian. "While he was alive, the garden was purely for his own enjoyment, but when he wasn't around any more he wanted them to be opened to the public so that they could get the kind of pleasure he got from them."

As wishes go, this one has been splendidly realised, but maintaining and improving upon his epic achievement to provide year-round interest is no easy task. The nature of Fairhaven, with its bog-like core set in a watery bowl between densely wooded slopes, may offer its own distinctive micro-climate to allow some pretty unlikely plantings to flourish, but it