



CONNAUGHT GARDENS SIDMOUTH

Guided Garden Walk



Welcome to Connaught Gardens. In recognition of the horticultural interest which exists within the Gardens, East Devon District Council have produced a guided walk for you to follow. There is a map on the back page for your information that shows you where each of the described areas are located.

Introduction

Connaught Gardens are situated in an exposed coastal position under the shadow of Peak Hill and occupy a prominent position on top of the marl cliffs overlooking the sweep of Lyme Bay.

The Gardens were acquired in 1932 amidst much controversy at the time and were named after His Grace, the Duke of Connaught. The grounds were part of an old private estate and occupied by a house called Sea View, the gardens themselves being little over an acre in area. The grounds were originally divided into three sections by high walls which were required to break up the fury of the prevailing gales experienced from the south west along this part of the coast.

Two of these walled sections had been used for growing fruit and vegetables whilst the third was the pleasure garden consisting of the lawn that swept up to the front of the house. Numerous small beds and paths encircled the lawn and curved in and out of the wind blighted shrub borders.

The Sidmouth Urban District Council decided at the outset that these gardens required different treatment to the typical local authority park of the day which consisted of wide paths with massed flower beds and a children's playground. They therefore contacted the gardens department of Dartington Hall Limited, Totnes, to design a scheme and also to carry out the construction works.

It was decided to demolish the old house as it could serve no useful purpose in the proposed layout. The lawn with certain modifications could still serve its purpose in its existing position and the high walls were considered essential to retain in order to provide shelter. The old entrance drive was also retained and the final design built around these features that still survive today and provide the main backbone to the structure of the garden.

Whichever entrance you used to enter Connaught Gardens, make your way to the Raised Garden (No. 1 on your map). You may wish to take advantage of the toilets as you pass.

1. Raised Garden.

This area is an original feature of the garden and it seems to have been designed as a convenient feature to construct with the spoil removed from the excavation of the Sunken Garden nearby! The climate in this section is mild but strong winds often damage tender foliage which grows above the protection of the wall.

Look back towards the entrances and you will notice that the public conveniences are screened by the vigorous *Clematis montana*, climbing roses (probably 'Etoile de Holland') and a tree *Fuchsia*.



Plants of interest in Area 1:

- *Chamerops humilis* - The Dwarf Fan Palm. Just about hardy here, but may display some frost and wind damage. Has dense, tiny, yellow flowers in the summer of a good year.
- *Phoenix canariensis* - Canary Island Date Palm. Again, only hardy in favoured spots on the coast, this elegant palm can produce fruit but it is unlikely to ripen in the UK.
- *Dicksonia antarctica* - Soft Tree Fern. Originally from Tasmania this fern is unusual because the 'trunk' is, in fact, a mass of roots which supports the foliage above the ground. Only half-hardy.
- *Cycas revoluta* - Japanese Sago Palm. Not a palm, but a cycad. Cycads are some of the most primitive plants in the world and pre-date the dinosaur era by millions of years. These plants shouldn't survive in Connaught Gardens but they do!
- *Phormium tenax* - New Zealand Flax. These have become common in gardens throughout Southern Britain because of their tropical appearance combined with toughness. You will see a selection of varieties spread throughout the gardens.
- *Musa basjoo* - Japanese Banana. Often battered by winter winds but seems to survive. Fruit are tiny and not edible.

2. North Border.

This border starts in a sunny location and then follows the path into an area which is in shade for majority of the day. The plants here are adapted for life on the forest floor and often show very strong pigments in their foliage in order to extract the maximum goodness out of the sunlight which does get through.

Plants of interest in Area 2:

- *Agapanthus* - African Blue Lily. From southern Africa, these plants have been hybridised extensively, and now have spectacular flower heads in mid-late summer.
- *Echium pininana*. From the Canaries, these tender biennials produce a tall flowering spike in their second year which you will see in various locations throughout the gardens.
- *Yucca gloriosa* - Spanish Dagger. Despite the name it comes from America. Moderately hardy and can produce columns of white flowers from the centre.
- *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrascens'. Currently very fashionable with garden designers, this is a forest floor ground cover plant from China.
- *Helleborus orientalis* - Lenten Rose. Early flowering perennial from Greece.
- *Carex flagellifera* and *Carex hachijoensis* 'Evergold'. Two varieties of sedge which normally prefer a damp site but seem to do well here.
- *Bergenia* 'Sunningdale' - Elephant Ears. Planted in various parts of the garden. Big evergreen leaves with pink flowers in spring. Can look tatty if uncared for.

3. Topiary Garden.

A section of the gardens with many low clipped Box (*Buxus sempervirens*) hedges, a sunken water feature and a sub-tropical border.



The shape of the garden is an original feature, but the plants used have changed over the years. Originally there were rose beds, then in 1977 it was changed to small formal lawns in commemoration of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. In 1996, the lawns were worn out and changed to the box and stone chippings seen today.

At the time of writing, the box plants are not thriving. The



problem is being monitored and unless a solution is found, this area will change again. A number of ideas have been discussed, the most popular at the moment is an Italian style garden with a larger water feature.

Plants of interest in Area 3:

- *Cordyline australis* - The Cabbage Palm or Torbay Palm. Common in coastal areas of the South West UK, these are not true palms but look similar and are quite hardy when they are established.
- *Brahea brandegeei* - San Jose Hesper Palm. From America, these fan palms are only just hardy right on the coast. They would grow to 12m high in California but the growing season is too short here to get to that size.
- *Washingtonia filifera*. Another fan palm from America. Can have creamy white flower spikes up to 5m long. Not hardy away from the sea.
- *Beschorneria yuccanoides*. Rare and tender plant from Mexico. Can have red, yellow and green flowers on a single stem in a good year.
- *Pseudopanax crassifolius* - weird and spikey plant from New Zealand. One for the enthusiast!
- *Hedychium coccinium* 'Tara' - Red Ginger Lily. Tender perennial which has orange flowers in late summer.
- *Agave americana* 'Marginata'. From Mexico the Agave is the crop grown to produce the drink Tequila. Fierce spines protect it from damage - take care! Thought to be tender, Agaves survive well outdoors when established.

Area 4. The Showhouse.

The Showhouse provides year round protection from the elements for two collections of tender plants.

The Carnivorous Collection. These plants have evolved to live in damp soils of very low fertility. To make up their nutrition, they catch and digest insects and other small organisms. The compost they grow in is very acid, damp and contains no added fertilisers.

The Cactus Collection lives under very different conditions. Dry, warm and very well drained soil to simulate the deserts of the world. If you are lucky, a cactus may be in flower. This happens infrequently, but the flowers can be spectacular.

Information boards for both collections are provided on the back wall of the showhouse.

Area 5. The Viewpoint.

Look out over the panorama of Lyme Bay. On a fine day Portland Bill and Chesil Beach can be seen. A new direction finder will guide you to the points of interest.

Behind the viewpoint are the Tamarix stools. These are cut back hard each autumn to keep the summer foliage fresh. They look dead all winter and suddenly jump into action when the weather warms up in spring.

Area 6. The Rock Garden.

Not a true rockery. More a number of small terraces to hold back the soil. Plants growing here take a lot of wind and salt spray during the winter. It is surprising how many species will survive these challenging conditions.

Plants of interest in Area 6:

- *Fasticularia bicolor*. A spiny bromeliad which is a primitive plant form. In late summer the centre of each plantlet can turn bright red and contain a strange pale blue flower. This only seems to happen in certain years.



- *Dasyliirion acrotrichum*. Desert shrub from Mexico, which can send up a 4m high pole covered in white flowers.
- *Euphorbia melifera* - Honey Spurge. From Madeira, honey scented 'flowers' are produced in late spring. Take care, all euphorbias give off a sap which can cause severe irritation.

Area 7. The Jungle.

This area has recently been the subject of safety works to the *Quercus ilex* (Holly Oak) trees which form the shelter belt for the garden. This has left a few gaps, but has allowed us to replant with new species.



As befits the Jungle theme, most plants here originate from the Far East. Established Camellias produce a wonderful show of flowers in early spring, and the newly planted bamboo collection will spread out to form a carpet under the trees.

Plants of interest in Area 7:

- *Sasa tsuboiana* and *Sasa veitchii*, *Pleioblastus distichus* and *pumilus*. These low growing bamboos are the natural forest floor flora in China and Japan. They all tolerate shade well and look at their best in July when the wind damage from winter has been replaced with fresh green leaves.
- *Chimonobambusa tumidissinoda*. A very rare species which has swollen nodes on each cane. This is used for the manufacture of walking sticks in the Orient.
- *Phyllostachys nigra* - Black Bamboo. Currently very fashionable and used on a lot of the TV garden makeover programmes.
- *Thamnocalamus crassinodus* 'Merlyn'. A neat clump forming bamboo with the smallest leaves of any.
- *Semiarundinaria fastuosa*. A very upright bamboo which has been used for traditional fishing rods.
- *Fargesia robusta*. As its name suggests, this is a very hardy bamboo which forms a graceful clump.

Area 8. The Main Lawn.

The lawn itself is an original feature which has remained largely unchanged from the days when Connaught was a private garden. The borders around the lawn have been replanted, most recently the north herbaceous border.

This was replanted in 2002 and contains a number of less hardy species that we hope will thrive here. So far the border has been a great success and provides year round interest. (You have to look fairly hard in February!)

Plants of interest in Area 8:

- *Pseudopanax ferox*. (Right side of bandstand) Another of the New Zealand weirdos. Strange and spikey, also known as Lancewood, it will eventually grow into a medium tree. Very 'Lord of the Rings'!
- *Nipponanthemum nipponicum*. Herbaceous border From Japan, this rarity this has daisy like flowers for 6 months of the year.
- *Crinum powellii*. A hybrid of two different swamp lilies produced by accident in a garden Sends up tall spikes of pale pink flowers in autumn.

- *Malvastrum lateritium*. Rare perennial from Argentina which produces peach coloured flowers in late spring.

Area 9. Sunken Garden.

This garden is a sheltered sun trap. The stone surfaces absorb the sun's rays and keep the garden warm at night. This helps all the plants off to an early start in spring. Climbing roses and herbaceous plants line the walls and the centre beds contain colourful displays of annuals.



Plants of interest in Area 9:

- *Dierama pulcherrimum* - Angels Fishing Rod. From Zimbabwe, long stems with dangling pink flowers are produced in summer.
- *Echinops 'Taplow Blue'* - Globe Thistle.
- *Hemerocallis 'Stella de Oro'*. A compact day lily with lots of yellow flowers in summer. Open during the day, they close up as the sun drops in late afternoon.



Areas 10 and 11. Pergola Walk and Lime Kiln Garden.

The red brick and oak beam pergola provides shade and attractive foliage in summer. It is covered in *Akebia quinata* - The Chocolate Vine, which comes from China. Brown or purple flowers are produced in spring which give off a spicy scent. The perfect place to sit in the shade on a summers day.

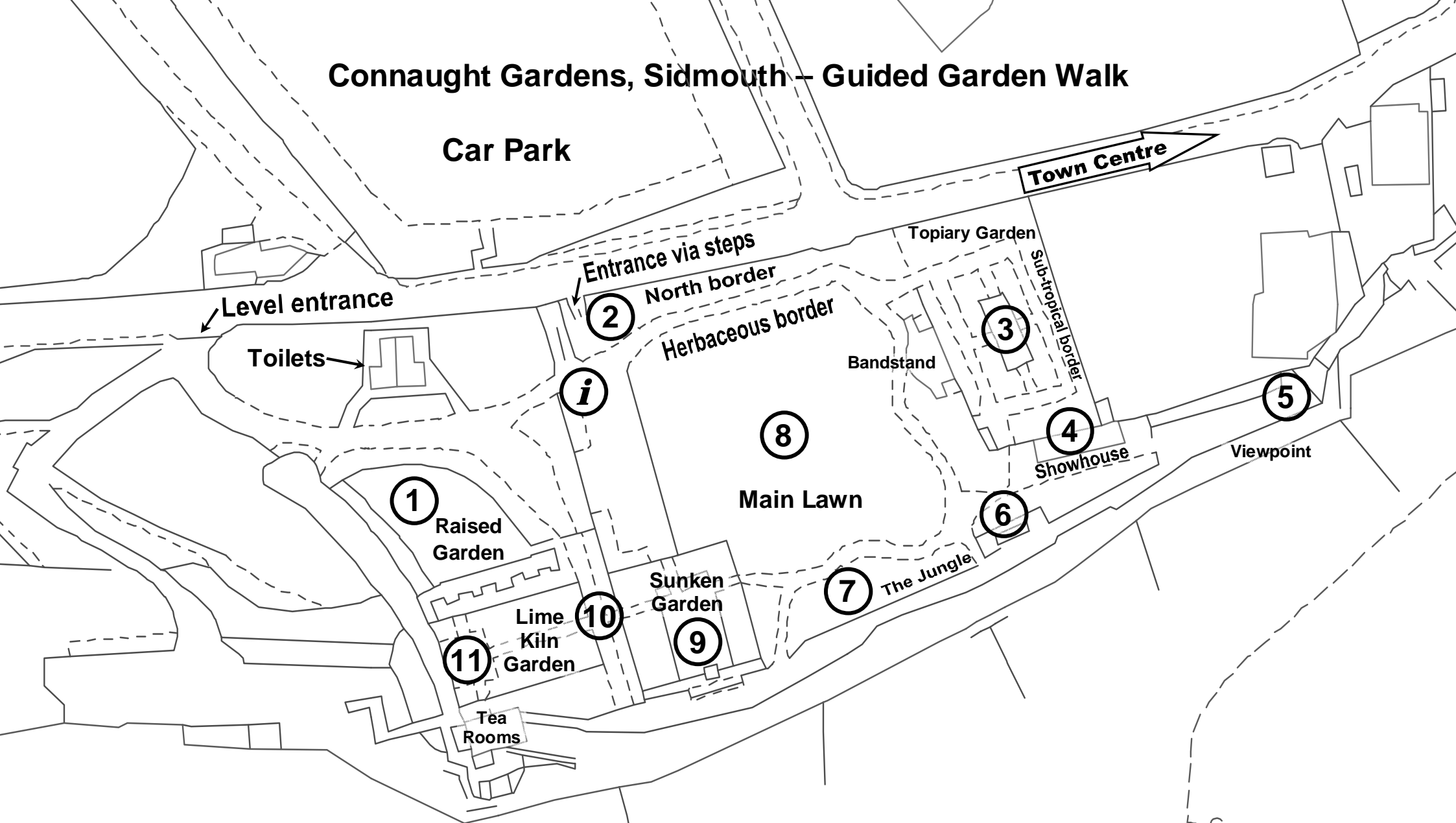
Lime Kiln Garden is largely used for displays of seasonal bedding but on the south facing wall are examples of the climber *Fremontodendron californicum* - The Flannel Bush. This has gloriously showy yellow flowers that are usually produced in two flushes in spring and autumn. One of the better exports of California.

While in this area, take the opportunity to sample the highly regarded refreshments provided by the Fraser family in the Lime Kiln Tea Rooms.

We hope you enjoyed your tour of the gardens and that you will visit again.



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If you have any queries or comments, please telephone the Parks Development Officer on (01395) 516551 or visit www.eastdevon.gov.uk