

BEST GARDENS TO VISIT NEAR LOOE

1. THE EDEN PROJECT, NEAR ST AUSTELL ~ 35 MINUTES BY CAR.

The world-famous Eden Project is at the top of everyone's 'must see' list. In a disused clay quarry near St Austell, space age biomes with climate-controlled conditions house plants and flowers from the Equator and Mediterranean regions. Outside, you'll recognise more familiar horticulture in the temperate zone.

The Eden Project is very much an educational experience. It's not to be compared with seeing flowers and plants in their more traditional setting at historic houses and gardens. There's a big emphasis on sustainability and lessons for mankind in how to care for planet earth. As Cornwall's leading visitor attraction, the Eden Project has great facilities, catering for all abilities. We suggest you allow a minimum of 4 hours for your visit.

2. LANHYDROCK, NEAR BODMIN ~ 26 MINUTES BY CAR.

Lanhydrock is described as the 'jewel in the crown' for the National Trust. It's undoubtedly one of the most impressive historic houses and gardens in Cornwall. Although the original house dates to 1620, a terrible fire in 1881 paved the way for the most amazing renovation, which featured the latest technology and mod cons of the day. The kitchens at Lanhydrock are straight out of Upstairs Downstairs. Faced with crippling death duties, the family handed over the estate to the National Trust in 1953, so you experience an incredible sense of time and place seeing all the personal memorabilia intact. The house is set in 22 acres of superb gardens and 30 acres of woodland within an estate of 450 acres. There are 50 rooms open to the public so Lanhydrock is always our top suggestion for a rainy day.

3. LOST GARDENS OF HELIGAN, NEAR MEVAGISSEY ~ 55 MINUTES BY CAR.

The Heligan valley rises above the quaint fishing town of Mevagissey. It basks in its own microclimate, allowing exotic plants in Heligan's Jungle Valley and its famous walled kitchen to flourish. In June, an emotive sight is the field of red poppies planted to remember the fallen from the First World War. So few of Heligan's estate workers returned from the trenches that Heligan fell into disrepair. Through neglect, the house and garden were lost until the mossy carpets were rolled back in the 1990s by Tim Smit who later went on to establish the Eden Project. In Heligan's walled garden in autumn, you might see plump pumpkins and pineapples grown on site. Other highlights include large areas dedicated to wild habitat with bird hides and viewing areas to watch nesting owls. Allow a whole day to get lost at the Lost Gardens of Heligan, combining a visit to Mevagissey.

4. CAERHAYS CASTLE, ROSELAND PENINSULAR ~ 1 HOUR BY CAR.

Another of our historic houses to visit on a day out from Looe is Caerhays Castle just beyond St Austell on the Roseland Peninsula. Visit in April and May to see the gardens at their best. Here a fairy-tale castle overlooks a beautiful lake and stream running down toward Porthluney Beach. The castle stands majestically against a backdrop of magnolias, rhododendrons and azaleas which tower above you as you walk the many paths through the wooded estate. Caerhays holds one of the UK's National Magnolia Collections, some over 100 years old. To this day, the collection of camellias and magnolias in Cornwall exceeds anywhere else in the UK.

5. MT EDGCUMBE HOUSE & COUNTRY PARK ~ HALF AN HOUR BY CAR.

Just a short drive heading east along Whitsand Bay brings you to Mt Edgcumbe House and Country Park on the Rame Peninsular. Open to the public all year, there is no entrance fee to gain access to the formal gardens, where themes created from the 16th century include Italian Renaissance, French, New Zealand, Japanese and American Gardens. Mt Edgcumbe is famous for its National Camellia Collection with camellias appearing from January on. Our favourite time to visit is a perfect sunny summer's day when the lawns sweeping down to the water's edge overlooking Plymouth Sound make such a wonderful picnic site.

6. ANTONY, RAME PENINSULAR ~ 23 MINUTES BY CAR.

Antony is one of the National Trust's lesser-known properties, boasting magnificent magnolias and enjoying sweeping views across the River Lynher and Rame Peninsular. The house remains the home of the Carew Pole family and more recently found fame when its magic was captured in the film 'Alice in Wonderland'. After exploring its formal courtyard, terraces, ornamental Japanese pond, fine summer borders, sculptures, and knot garden, you can enjoy afternoon tea in the delightful Broomhill Cottage Tearoom oozing vintage charm.