

A Guide To

Isabella Plantation



Richmond Park
A ROYAL PARK



Isabella Plantation

In the centre of Richmond Park, east of Ham Cross, is the Isabella Plantation, a 40 acre (17ha) woodland garden set within a Victorian plantation. The Plantation was first enclosed in 1831 and the majority of the Oaks, Beech and Sweet Chestnut trees date back to this time, however some trees are older with a few ancient Oak pollards pre dating the Park's enclosure in 1637.

The name Isabella Plantation is thought to have derived from Old English. Historic maps of the Park mark this area as 'Isabell Slade'; Isabell is thought to mean dingy yellow (possibly referring to the colour of the topsoil in some areas of the Garden), and Slade is a term for a shallow valley.



Isabell Slade marked on a map of Richmond Park dated 1771



Azaleas along Thomson's Stream

Work on the Garden began in the late 1940's and it was first opened to the public in 1953.

The Garden has developed from a simple streamside walk to a large collection of woodland trees and shrubs surrounding a number of interconnecting ponds and streams. Today the Garden's ponds and streams are fed by water pumped from Pen Ponds (large ponds situated in the centre of the Park) into the top of the Plantation and then returned to Pen Ponds through a series of pipes and ditches via an outlet from Peg's Pond. Much of the Garden layout seen today was developed by George Thomson (former Park Superintendent) and his head gardener Wally Miller. Their philosophy for the Garden has been further developed by a dedicated garden team and subsequent Park Managers.



A view of Still Pond with Azaleas in full flower

The shady conditions and acidic sandy soils provide ideal conditions for a wide range of woodland trees and shrubs. The Garden is perhaps best known for the evergreen Azaleas that line the ponds and streams and are at their peak of flower in late April and early May. Additionally, the Plantation houses the National Collection of Wilson 50 Kurume Azaleas, collected by the famous plant hunter Ernest Wilson in Japan in the 1920's. The Garden also contains large and important collections of old hardy hybrid Rhododendron and species Rhododendron as well as large collections of *Camellia japonica* cultivars and a broad range of rare and unusual trees and shrubs.

Today, Isabella Plantation is classified as part of the broader parkland Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The Garden is managed organically, with nature very much in mind and without recourse to the use of pesticides or herbicides. Leaf mould is collected and composted for use as a surface mulch and soil conditioner. Park bracken is also used a peat substitute and is cut annually and composted for use as an ericaceous compost for Rhododendrons and other acid loving plants.

The Garden offers something to see all year round. One of the first signs of spring are the yellow spathes of the Skunk Cabbage (*Lysichiton americanum*) which line the Plantation's streams. In spring the Garden's collection of Camellias and Magnolias bloom. Bulbs such as native daffodils (*Narcissus bulbocodium* and *Narcissus cyclamineus*) begin flowering and are followed by Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) which flower in naturalised drifts around the Garden. Rhododendrons and Azaleas flower from the early spring and throughout the summer months.

In summer, Day Lilies (*Hemerocallis sp.*) and Candelabra Primulas (*Primula japonica*) also flower in the Bog Garden. In late summer the white panicles of the Oak-Leaved Hydrangeas (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) flower in various areas of the Garden, and the blue flower spikes of Pickerel Weed (*Pontederia cordata*) flower in the Garden's ponds and pools.

In the autumn the Garden is alive with colour which ranges from rich reds and scarlets through to oranges and butter yellows. Trees which provide autumn leaf colour include Maples (*Acer ssp.*), Sweet Gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), Black Gum or Tupelo Trees (*Nyssa sylvatica*), Tulip Trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) and the Persian Ironwood (*Parrotia persica*). Deciduous conifers such as the Swamp Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) and the Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) add fiery browns and orange hues to the Garden's autumnal palette of colours.



Dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) growing on Thomson's Lawn

SELF-GUIDED TOUR OF

1 *Rhododendron luteum*, Common Yellow Azalea. Heavy Fragrance (Apr – May).

2 *Hamamelis mollis*, Chinese Witch Hazel. Small, fragrant yellow tassel flowers (Dec-Feb).

3 *Pinus nigra*, Austrian Pine. Dark greyish brown bark (Bark of Scots Pine is orange-tinged).

4 Japanese Kurume azaleas, including some of the 'Wilson 50' National Collection (Apr-May).

5 *Erica arborea*, Tree Heath. Fragrant white flowers (March).

6 *Taxodium distichum*, Swamp Cypress. Grows aerial roots when mature.

7 *Erica carnea*, Winter-flowering Heather. Several cultivars (Dec-Mar).

8 *Gunnera manicata*, Giant Rhubarb. Bog plant; huge leaves, prickly stems; herbaceous – dies down in winter.

9 *Prunus serrula*, Tibetan Cherry. Glossy peeling red bark. Introduced by Ernest Wilson.

10 *Magnolia stellata*, Fragrant white star-like flowers (Mar-Apr).

13 *Nyssa sylvatica*, Tupelo Tree. Rich Autumn Colour.



11 *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, Dawn Redwood. Known only from fossil records until discovered growing in China in 1941.

12 *Rhododendron yakushimanum* hybrids - The Seven Dwarfs.

14 *Liriodendron tulipifera*, Tulip Tree. Distinctive 3-lobed leaf, turning gold in autumn. Green-yellow flowers on mature trees (July).

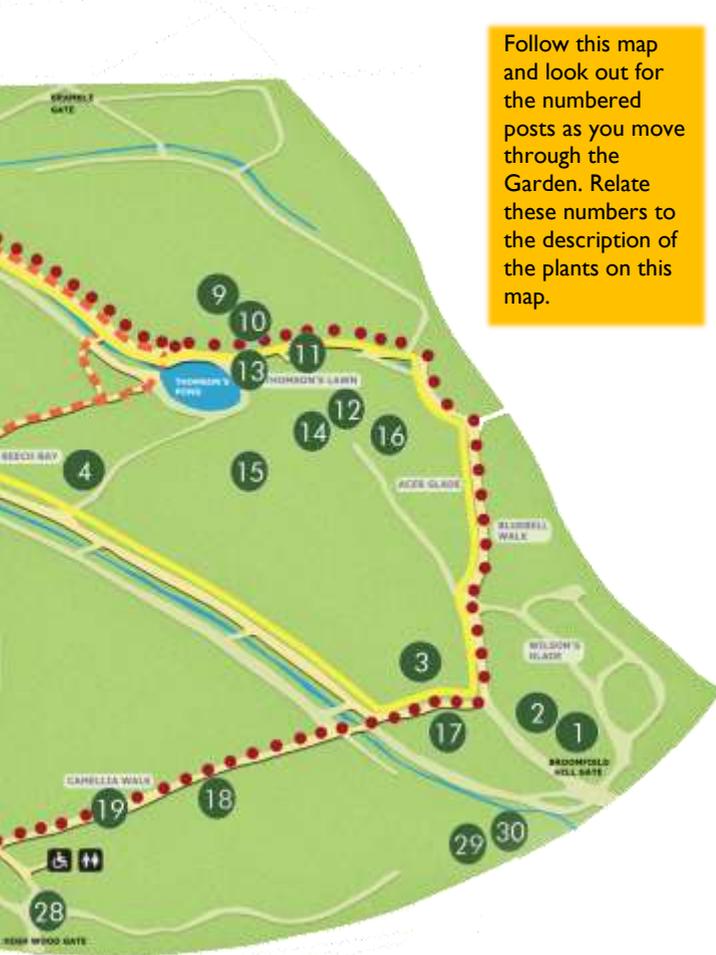
15 *Magnolia grandiflora*. Huge fragrant white flowers (Jul-Sep).

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16 *Acer aconitifolium*. Elegant cut leaf and fine autumn colour.

19 *Camellia japonica* 'Hagoromo'. A pink semi-double, with other cultivars which flower Feb-early May.

Follow this map and look out for the numbered posts as you move through the Garden. Relate these numbers to the description of the plants on this map.



17 *Clethra alnifolia*, Sweet Pepper Bush. White, sweetly scented flowers

18 *Davidia involucreta*, Pocket Handkerchief Tree. Large, white hanging bracts (May). Introduced by Ernest Wilson.

20 *Styrax japonicus*, Snowbell Tree. Small white pendant flowers (June).

21 Marriage of Beech and Oak: Two trees curiously growing together.

22 *Paulownia tomentosa*, Foxglove Tree. Large felted leaves and panicles of blue foxglove shaped flowers (May).

23 *Rhododendron* 'Wally Miller'. A hybrid produced by and named after Isabella's first Head Gardener.

24 *Quercus robur*, Ancient Oak Pollard. Some four hundred years old.

25 *Betula utilis* var. *jaquemontii*, Himalayan Birch. A multi-stem form with white bark. Several in the garden.

26 *Magnolia sieboldii* subsp. *sinensis*. White lemon-scented, nodding flowers (June).

27 *Rhododendron falconeri*. Himalayan species (April).

28 *Castanea sativa*, Sweet chestnut. Yellow-green catkins in July; crop of nuts in Autumn.

29 *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, Wellingtonia or Giant Redwood. Largest, one of the longest living of all trees.

30 *Sequoia sempervirens*, Coast Redwood. The tallest of all trees.

Many of the Garden's shrubs also bear bright autumn fruits such as the Guelder Rose (*Viburnum opulus*), Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*), Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) and Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*). In winter the Plantation's cold air is warmed by the scents of Winter Flowering Honeysuckle (*Lonicera x purpusii* 'Winter Beauty'), Wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*) and Witch Hazels (*Hamamelis* sp.). At this time of year the decorative and colourful barks of trees such as the Tibetan Cherry (*Prunus serrula*) and the Paperbark Maple (*Acer griseum*) are also obvious.



The beautiful and scented yellow flowers of the Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis mollis*)

Throughout the Garden, native plants can be found growing alongside more exotic introductions. Areas such as the Heather Garden with its collection of *Erica* and *Calluna* cultivars aim to mimic natural heathland. Heathers are allowed to grow without excessive pruning and are planted alongside native shrubs that are associated with wild heathland such as Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and native Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*). Tree Heaths such as *Erica arborea*, *Erica australis* and *Erica lusitanica* provide additional height, colour and texture.

The Bog Garden with its series of interconnecting pools is planted with exotic marginals such as Giant Rhubarb (*Gunnera manicata*) and ornamental grasses such as Golden Oats (*Stipa gigantea*). These plants grow alongside native perennials such as Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium purpureum*), Rosebay Willowherb (*Epilobium angustifolium*) and Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and shrubs such as Dogwood (*Cornus* sp) and pollarded Willow (*Salix alba* cultivars) which produce coloured stems in winter.



Joe Pye Weed and Purple Loosestrife growing on the margins of the Bog Garden

The Plantation is surrounded by a conservation area which is not open to the public and provides a safe refuge for wildlife. Foxes and badgers find shelter in this area and the fringes of the Garden. The Plantation's varied habitats support a broad range of wildlife. The perimeter shelterbelts of the Garden are planted with native nectar and berry-bearing trees and shrubs. Wild Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*) and Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) are also allowed to colonise these areas to provide additional food and shelter for birds and insects, particularly butterflies.

The mix of native and exotic planting includes native perennials, which provide a valuable source of nectar for a wide range of insects such as bees, wasps, butterflies and moths. These attractive plants are retained in areas such as the Bog Garden and along sections of stream, their spread controlled by the removal of flower heads prior to seeding.

The Plantation's ponds are home to a wide range of birds including Mallard, Coot and Moorhen as well as wildfowl such as Tufted and Mandarin Duck. Kingfisher and Heron fish in the garden's ponds and streams. Grass snakes, dragonflies, damselflies, frogs and toads feed and breed in the Plantation's waters.



Heron taking-off, Peg's Pond decks

The Garden's trees and shrubs offer food and shelter for numerous birds including Blackbird, Thrush, Robin, Long-tailed Tit, Chiffchaff and Blackcap, as well as Green and Greater Spotted Woodpecker, which can often be heard drumming in the trees. Sparrowhawk also hunts smaller woodland birds in the Plantation.

The Plantation is also home to a large population of ancient trees including native Common or Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*), Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) which are high in biodiversity and have their own associated ecosystems. In order to protect species and habitat wherever possible deadwood is retained in the Garden, for the benefit of wildlife including birds, bats, wood rotting fungi and deadwood invertebrates. It also adds aesthetic and historic value to the Plantation. Decaying wood is retained as standing deadwood in the form of monoliths (dead trees with reduced branches) and as stumps or fallen logs in the form of bird tables and seats.



A veteran Oak tree growing in the Azalea Glade



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Tread Lightly

We would like you to enjoy your visit to Isabella Plantation but please help to protect and conserve the Plantation for this and future generations of visitors by observing the following rules:

-  **Keep out of ponds and streams.** Trampling causes erosion to bank edges and damages habitat.
-  **Do not climb trees or walk in beds or borders.** Isabella Plantation contains many rare and unusual trees and shrubs. Climbing trees can break branches and trampling beds causes root compaction.
-  **Take litter home or dispose of it within the bins provided outside the main gates or in car parks.** Litter is unsightly and encourages squirrels and other vermin which cause considerable damage to trees and shrubs.
-  **Do not light barbecues or fires.** Fires cause damage to the garden, its plant collection and wildlife.
-  **Do not take or disturb plants, fruits, fungi or wood.** It deprives wildlife of food and harms biodiversity.
-  **Do not release plants or animals.** Introductions from gardens, ponds and aquaria can threaten the Park's natural flora and fauna.
-  **Dispose of dog waste in the bins provided outside the main gates and within car parks.** Dog faeces are anti-social, a health threat to humans and wildlife, and the nutrients damage grassland habitats.
-  **Always keep dogs under control and on leads.** Dogs can kill, injure and disturb waterfowl and wildlife and damage habitats.
-  **Do not play ball games.** Stray balls can damage plants.
-  **Do not cycle, skate or use scooters within the Plantation.** Paths are for the use of pedestrians. Cycle parking is available at both of the Plantation's main gates.
-  **Do not feed birds.** Foods such as bread, cakes and crisps are not part of their natural diet and cause harm to birds and their habitat.



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