

I can't pick a favourite one. They are all my favourites!

It might be a cliché that East Anglia is a place of big skies and extraordinary light – the kind of assets that make visiting Londoners gape – but that doesn't make it untrue. We've also got some stunning gardens adding to the 'wow!' factor. **Steven Russell** takes a tour.



Most East Anglians are modest folk for whom boasting is an alien concept. But even if we were to suggest our region is pretty darned fantastic and special, we couldn't be convicted of bias. For we could present in our defence *relative newcomers* (at 30 years plus, but you know what I mean!) such as Barbara Segall, who have fallen for it hook, line and sinker.

"I fell instantly under the spell of this magical region and its idyllic landscapes, the spirit of which is captured so remarkably in the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable," she confesses.

Case dismissed, then.

It's probably fair to say her new book wouldn't have happened had she not said farewell to the metropolis.

"I wanted to move out of London to have a garden and grow more fruit, veg and herbs... at that time I could afford the relatively lower prices of houses in Suffolk. So I moved in 1986 to a house with a half-acre garden," she explains.

"I met lots of local gardeners and started to visit gardens for work – as a garden writer, and, for

pleasure, as an enthusiastic gardener. Gradually I realised that the gardens I visited had such charm and character and I decided to collect their stories."

That laid the groundwork for her book *Secret Gardens of East Anglia: A Private Tour of 22 Gardens*. A gentle labour of love in partnership with horticultural photographer Marcus Harpur, it celebrates the culture, beauty and diversity of Suffolk, Essex, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire.

In her introduction she talks about the conditions that affect East Anglia – from the summer droughts to hard winds; from dry sandy "earth" to clay soils "that crack in summer, then become muddy impassable in winter" – and how they're overcome.

"In these pages you will also find the ingenious ways in which garden owners have responded to various design challenges, ranging from tiny domestic spaces to grand, historic settings.

"Some have created a garden from scratch. Several have started small, then been driven by their gardening ambitions to expand into the surrounding land."

Did she find many shared factors among the 22? "I don't



think there is a common thread uniting these gardens, although many have hedges and quirky topiary.

"Water in the shape of moats, large ponds and streams are also common features, but the gardens are all individual – the creations of the current owners, although in some cases there is a long history of gardening on the site," Barbara tells me.

Can she single out a favourite garden? *Dare you!* "No, I couldn't name a favourite of the 22, nor even from each of the counties... they are all my favourites!"

The observation about this "magical region and its idyllic landscapes..." What's that down to? "Well, there is something about being in the east of a country, especially here where the horizons are wide. Yes, I know the land is flat or relatively flat – and so the sky seems bigger than in counties such as Devon and Cornwall, which sometimes seems

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a bit enclosed with narrow lanes and hedges." Quite a big claim, though, isn't it, that "the whole of East Anglia is a rather secret, unsung place"? What's that down to? Geography?

"East Anglia has a sense of space, and if you look at our main road systems we have a sparser network of main roads – lots of small, wiggly country roads – and you find that the west, Devon, Cornwall and Cotswolds seem to have more of a pull for tourists.

"So yes, I think you are right – it is a matter of geography and shape. It feels as if the bulge out into the North Sea connects us

more easily to the Continent."

Barbara, who lives in the Sudbury area, is a champion of low-maintenance gardening. Are there any easy tips she could share? "I don't have a lawn any longer and that means I don't have to mow, but that is a bit extreme! Instead I have a densely-packed central bed in the garden where plants combine to support each other; and because they cover the ground so well, the weeds don't stand a chance!"

"I think it is good to use plants that are drought-tolerant, as we have a relatively low rainfall in Suffolk, although some days last month you could be forgiven for disbelieving me!"

Secret Gardens of East Anglia is published by Frances Lincoln at £20. Barbara writes a blog at www.thegardenpost.com. She has a local book launch at midday today (September 9) at The Aldeburgh Bookshop.



Wyken Hall



Main image;
Wood Farm.
All pictures:
MARCUS HARPUR



Columbine Hall



Polstead
Mill

They're included!

Columbine Hall at Stowupland: Moated garden with series of green rooms.
Helmingham Hall Gardens: Gem of a garden hidden in own moated island.
Kirtling Tower, near Newmarket: Field of daffodils for a Tudor gatehouse.
Parsonage House, Wiggens Green, near Haverhill: Archetypal English gardens around timber-framed house.
Polstead Mill: Playful foliage, boisterous borders and potager.
Tinkers Green Farm, Cornish Hall End, near Braintree: Decorative

vegetable garden in framework of box and yew.
Ulting Wick, near Maldon: Thousands of tulips against backdrop of black wooden barns.
Wickham Place Farm, Wickham Bishops: Wisteria flourishes on centuries-old garden wall.
Wood Farm, Gipping: Marvellous eight-acre wildflower meadow.
Wyken Hall, Stanton: Vines and roses around Elizabethan manor house.

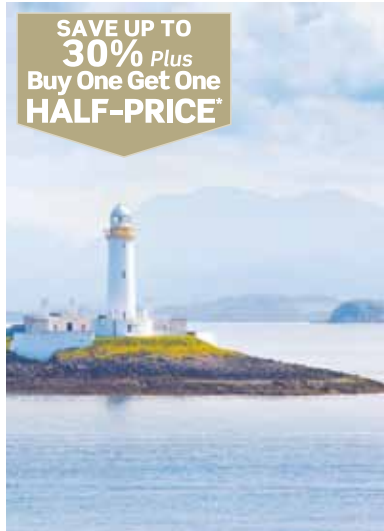
■ **Many have websites or open under National Garden Scheme (www.ngs.org.uk)**



Right: Ulting Wick

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