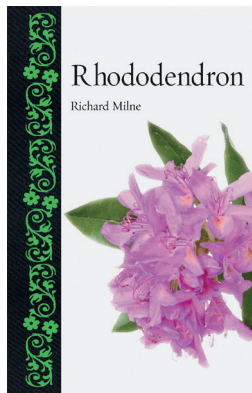


# BOOK REVIEWS



**RHODODENDRON**  
by Richard Milne  
Reaktion Books, £16

ISBN 978-1780238159

An enlightening and accessible account of a sometimes maligned genus, covering its evolution, cultural significance and social impact.

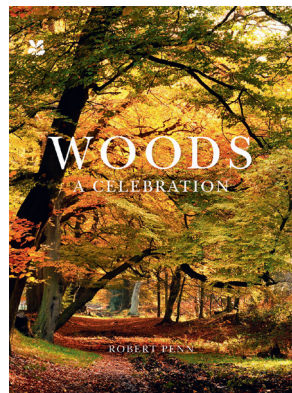
*Reviewer John Hoyland is a plantsman and garden writer*

Few plants have seen such extremes in its fortunes as has the rhododendron, from the heights of its popularity in the late 19th century, when a frenzy of hybridisation brought exuberant blooms to an eager public, to today, when the invasive nature of one species has tarnished the whole genus. But even the most ardent ‘rhodo basher’ could not fail to be beguiled by Milne’s enthusiasm for the plant.

The book explores the cultural and social influences of the genus and explains how its exceptional fertility has led to hybrids in the wild and in gardens. It is filled with engaging anecdotes about the exploits of early plant collectors and the motley group of plant breeders who fed the public appetite for rhododendrons. One chapter is dedicated to the *bête noire Rhododendron ponticum* and chronicles how the plant came to infest huge swathes of our countryside.

Deforestation, climate change and competition for land are major threats to rhododendrons, and the book suggests that several may already be extinct and many more vulnerable. Milne explains the importance of conserving the genetic diversity of both species and hybrids in collections and botanic gardens, and of working with countries, particularly China, to preserve the wild habitats where rhododendrons grow. In Britain, changing weather patterns and regulations limiting wild seed collection has caused one nursery – a grower and collector for several generations – to scale back its rhododendron production.

Milne, a botanist and academic, has the skill to communicate his knowledge clearly. He writes with a light touch and with a passion that makes the book accessible to gardeners who do not share his botanical background.



**WOODS: A CELEBRATION**  
by Robert Penn  
National Trust Books, £20

ISBN 978-1911358114

This book is packed with valuable information about the natural history of woods and will be of interest to any reader with a passion for trees.

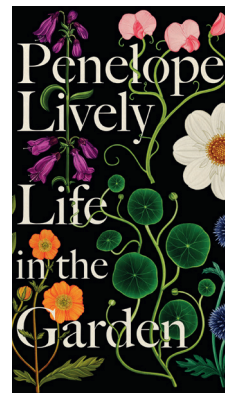
*Reviewer Tony Kirkham is head of the arboretum at Kew Gardens*

I find it hard to believe that it’s more than 30 years since the Great Storm of 1987 ravaged the countryside with hurricane-force winds, decimating much of the woodland of southeast England, but how time flies and how well nature mends itself if left to its own devices. This beautifully illustrated book from the National Trust, the second largest woodland owner in the UK, is a fitting celebration of our treescape. The National Trust owns some 420 woods and forests covering around 26,000 hectares in England and Wales, and many of these iconic spaces, home to both native and introduced tree species, are described here.

Broken down into four chapters, the book covers the four seasons we are so familiar with, and a quick flick through the pages takes us through a typical year in the life of a British woodland. The large, lavish colour photographs with

their lengthy, informative captions capture the seasonal atmosphere well and whet the reader’s appetite, inviting us to delve further into the intriguing natural history that we witness month by month in a temperate treescape. The book explores the biodiversity in our woodland, highlighting the animals, birds, invertebrates, fungi and wildflowers that rely on our wooded landscape for habitat and food as they become relevant to the seasons; bluebells in spring, butterflies in summer, fungi in autumn and feasting birds in winter.

Robert Penn writes with authority on the traditions associated with woodland management skills and the latest position on the effects of exotic invasive species on our trees. This is not a coffee-table book, but an informative guide to our woodlands today and all that they stand for.



**LIFE IN THE GARDEN**  
by Penelope Lively  
Fig Tree, £14.99

ISBN 978-0241319628

A beautifully written book that weaves memories of the author’s own gardens with a wider appreciation of garden style and fashion.

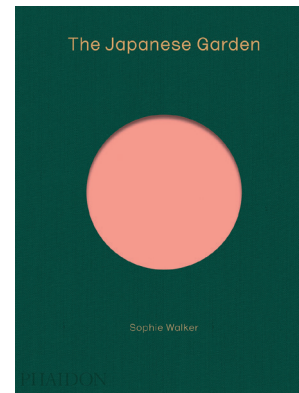
*Reviewer Anna Pavord is a garden writer*

I remember Penelope Lively’s gardening column in the early days of *The Independent*. It was a witty account of her love affair with a new greenhouse: the rapture of early spring bulbs flowering in this octagonal cedar paradise while the garden outside was still frostbittenly barren; the excitement of growing for the first time a crop of annual flowers from seed. The latter experiment was so successful she wondered whether she might advertise at the nearest layby: ‘Cut flowers; creative writing classes; tuition in political theory’ (her husband, Jack, taught politics at Oxford).

Writing has been at the centre of Penelope Lively’s life – she won the Booker Prize in 1987 for her novel *Moon Tiger* – but equally important to her are the reading and gardening. All three pursuits come together in this discursive book, which mixes memories of her own much-loved gardens with thoughts on gardens in art and literature.

She writes with wit on horticultural fashions and styles, perceptively on the concepts of time and order in the garden and superlatively well on gardens in books. She notes the ‘miasma of pretension’ surrounding the tedious Sitwells – Osbert, Edith and Sacheverell – and expresses irritation at the ‘extremely tiresome robin’ that hops through the pages of *The Secret Garden*. It’s always good to be in the company of a writer with strong opinions.

After creating two fairly large country gardens, Penelope Lively now lives in north London, with a smaller patch in her charge, but her eye is as sharp as ever. She mourns the loss of the personal elements that a garden would have ‘before we acquired everything from the garden centre’. She notices differences in window boxes. She marvels at the way all gardeners, even in their eighties as she is, assume a future for their garden. This is a wonderful book.



**THE JAPANESE GARDEN**  
by Sophie Walker  
Phaidon, £49.95

ISBN 978-0714874777

A scholarly yet attractive and accessible survey, given a personal twist by the author and graced by essays from noted designers.

*Reviewer Tim Richardson is a garden critic and regular columnist*

Garden designer Sophie Walker has assembled a starry line-up of essayists to bolster what would be a seriously impressive book even without the brief contributions of artist Anish Kapoor, mathematician Marcus du Sautoy and architects John Pawson and Tadao Ando.

The Japanese garden can seem an abstruse and difficult topic, but the author’s phenomenological approach, which involves writing in a free, direct and unembarrassed way about actual emotions experienced at the gardens, creates its own gateway for the reader. Early on the author writes of the value of ‘intimacy and wholeheartedness’ in gardening, and those qualities are evident throughout.

Each chapter deals with the significance of specific features, including gateways, paths, trees, rocks, bridges and water, or the religious and philosophical ideas underpinning these

effects. This interplay between the material and the spiritual is a constant theme, and comes to the fore in sections devoted to tea ceremony and the *wabi sabi* concept, the moon and the sun, and the dry garden.

Frequent poetry quotations are welcome and apposite. The most original chapter concerns the use of plants in the Japanese garden, often taken for granted because azaleas, bamboos and the like can seem commonplace.

The book is broken up with photographs and potted descriptions of key gardens, which creates a nice rhythm for the reader. Well-chosen images of key moments, such as the sculpted pine placed between hedges at Katsura Imperial Villa, are printed on greyish paper, which enhances the meditative, inward feel (glossy paper would send a different message).

In all this will make a worthwhile addition to any thinking gardener’s library.