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MARCH 2012

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on opening the grounds of his Caterham home



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Cover shot: Clandon Park
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Gorgeous Gardens

Words and photography by Leigh Clapp

The Golden touch...

For a real 'daffodil delight', take a stroll around the impressive gardens at The Chalet in Caterham, home to renowned businessman and chairman of West Ham FC **DAVID GOLD**, where you'll find thick carpets of these glorious harbingers of spring

AS chairman of West Ham FC and Gold Group International, which includes the Ann Summers chain and Gold Aviation, David Gold's entrepreneurial interests are well known – but it may come as something of a surprise to learn that he also has a passion for gardening.

In fact, at his splendid Victorian mansion, The Chalet in Caterham, he and his partner Lesley Manning have been busy restoring the gardens for several years, and now open them to the public every spring through the National Gardens Scheme.

Set in extensive grounds of 55 acres, with far-reaching views across rolling countryside towards the South Downs, the gardens are a spectacular place at this time of year – but it's taken a great deal of hard work to get there since David first moved into the property in 1995, after two years spent restoring the house, with Lesley arriving in 1997.

"There was no garden to speak of back then," says David. "The storm of 1987 had decimated the grounds with hundreds of trees being blown down and it took a couple of years just to clear them. It was an awful lot of work."

Nature's resilience was to bring a welcome surprise though, as having arrived in the summer there was no sign of what lay hidden under the ground ready to burst forth. "We cleared masses of gorse and bracken that had become overgrown and in spring the daffodils popped up!" says David. "We have a wonderful legacy as it takes generations to get such a naturalised carpet and it gives the house a great beauty."

David and Lesley have slightly differing

ideas regarding the evolution of the gardens – David liking formality of areas and Lesley preferring to see more natural elements included as well. The balance is reached by formality around the house with structural ponds and garden beds, extending out towards a golf course, while there are wildlife ponds in the bottom fields, home to a plethora of newts, frogs, and moorhens, as well as woodland and grassland areas.

Binding together the effect in spring is the sea of tens of thousands of golden and white daffodils across the landscape under a canopy of emerging blossom.

A labour of love

"The property is an all-consuming passion and I have become obsessed in improving the gardens each year," says David. "I am forever looking at new plans and like to hear the visitors' comments when we open the gardens. In fact, we are looking to bring in vintage cars to enhance the experience further this year."

New plants and bulbs are planted each year to increase the beauty of the March scene, including scented purple hyacinths contrasting with the golden daffodils, as well as tulips, primulas and anemones in raised beds by the house. Planting a variety of both foliage and flowering plants to ensure interest through the year is also important.

One of David's top tips is to take photos of your garden in order to have a critical look and help decide what needs adding to or changing. "It allows us to plant extra bulbs in an organised way and we also want happy flowers that work well," he adds.

Lesley finds it interesting to have input

here and there in a more cottagey style. "I like a bit of nature and I have encouraged David, who is so meticulous and likes even the woods to be neat, to have a little fallen timber, as it's necessary as habitats, and also to have some wilder areas left with buddleias, thistles and nettles to encourage a myriad of butterflies.

"I have also given David, who is impossible to buy gifts for, shrubs and trees, such as hydrangeas and magnolia grandiflora, to extend the seasonal interest and even owl houses as it is lovely to see the birds you can encourage in."

Lesley's attempt to establish some swans on one of the ponds has not been as successful. "We got a pair from a swan sanctuary and named them Philip and Elizabeth, but they swam around for a few days and then flew off!" says Lesley. "We tried again with a second pair and the same thing happened. The sanctuary wasn't worried though as it meant they must have been healthy!"

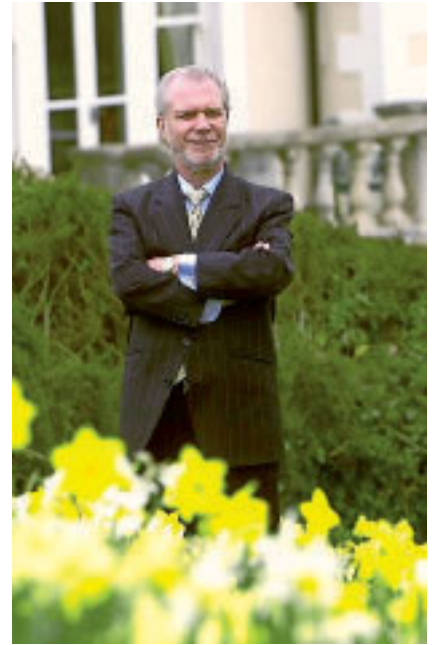
Opening the garden for two days through the National Gardens Scheme, to share the peak of the daffodils, is an obvious pleasure for them both.

"I am quite surprised at the enthusiasm people have for their gardens," says Lesley. "You immediately have something in common no matter what the age.

"We like to chat to anyone who comes along and I enjoy doing the cakes and teas. It's such a lovely atmosphere; people come with the right attitude. At the end, we're always exhausted, but it's such fun."

NEED TO KNOW:

The Chalet, Caterham CR3 6ET. Open on **Sunday March 25** and **Sunday April 1** (11am-4pm). See ngs.org.uk



Above: Tens of thousands of daffodils carpet the garden Above right: Gardening is a passion for David Right: A sculpture celebrates the deer that regularly visit the garden Bottom right: Daffodils lit by the sun Bottom centre: Lesley with Daisy against a backdrop of daffodils Bottom left: A mixed spring planting Below: The sea of gold

