



# A Wealden wander

If you enjoy the stillness and peacefulness of walking among trees on crisp, cold wintery days, then head for Bedgebury Pinetum in Goudhurst.

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The winter months are officially one of the best times to visit the Pinetum and on a bright, cold morning walkers will see the gentle touches of frost on already crisp leaves, and catch fleeting glimpses of winter sunlight dashing across the landscape, lighting up the different barks and conifer foliage.

At this time of year, the conifers take on the look of the mountains as the boughs creak under the weight of snow and frost crystallises the spiders' webs. The lakes turn into skating rinks for the ducks, and visitors can experience the calm serenity of being at one with nature away from the crowds. This is a paradise where trees are king.

The National Pinetum at Bedgebury is home to the finest collection of conifers in the world and these magnificent trees grow happily among some of our well-known deciduous broadleaf trees. The 10,000 conifers include Britain's native Yew, Juniper and Scots Pine but also many exotic conifer species, which are usually found as far away as Australia and China.

The hilly landscape has a string of lakes running across it and around every corner nature surprises visitors with its varied bird and animal life. Bedgebury is famous for its hawfinches, and bird enthusiasts come from far and wide to see these rare birds roosting.

The stillness and peacefulness of walking among the trees on frosty and snowy days in the winter months can be enjoyed when you embark on the new one-mile Winter Trail, which takes visitors past some of Bedgebury's most amazing trees including the Holm Oak (*Quercus ilex*). There are over 531 species of oak tree worldwide, nearly as many as all the conifer species put together, and they are undoubtedly one of our most important native trees with a distinguished role in our nation's history.

By crossing the wooden footbridge over Marshall's Lake you will see some coast redwoods, the tallest living species on earth. The redwoods you will see here are a fraction of their potential size, but in warmer climes they can often reach heights of 300 to 350 feet and diameters of 16 to 18 feet.



When a mantle of snow covers these trees you can almost imagine that you are not in the garden of England, but in the deepest depths of Canada or the American Rockies. Sadly, like nearly half the world's conifer species, they are under threat.

Conifers not only provide us with year-round interest with their colourful cones and interesting structures, but could tell us fascinating stories about how they helped the native Americans make teas and aromatic, piney-smelling incense, as well as healing many ailments.

Today, conifers have many uses from producing edible pine nuts to the production of turpentine, and help keep us healthy when used in herbal remedies; in the case of a particular 'Jew cultivar' at Bedgebury, the needles have been used to help treat cancer.

This is the time of year when you can see conifers at their best. The soft winter sun, frosts and snow play on the delicate foliage bringing the winter scene to life while highlighting the incredible diversity of this wonderful group of plants. It is also a superb time to examine the skeletal shape of our native broad-leaf trees. ■

### information

If you are thinking of visiting on a regular basis, it is worth investigating the Friends Membership, which provides unlimited access to the Pinetum and other gardens around the UK, including Kew and Wakehurst Place. For information, visit [www.bedgeburypinetum.org.uk](http://www.bedgeburypinetum.org.uk), or if you want to find out about the new visitor centre and activities available in Bedgebury Forest from early spring, visit [www.forestry.gov.uk/bedgebury](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/bedgebury) or tel: 01580 211044. Bedgebury Pinetum is one of the Seven Wonders of the Weald: [www.sevenwonders.org.uk](http://www.sevenwonders.org.uk) gives information on where to walk at a number of attractions in the area. Alternatively, visit [www.visittunbridgewells.com](http://www.visittunbridgewells.com) or contact the visitor information centre for further advice on the best places to walk in winter, tel: 01892 515675.