

# A nation of gardeners

For centuries, the role of the garden has been intertwined with English identity. More than “a nation of shopkeepers”, England is a nation of gardeners, who have long used horticulture to express who they are. Why then, in so many garden histories, is the role of society and culture overlooked? No garden is created in isolation, so this book is an attempt to position English gardens within this wider context, in order to understand who made them, and why.

On becoming a garden historian, I became fascinated by this bigger picture. All great gardens have individuality – a personality, if you like. So I wanted to learn more not only about the style and significance of each garden, but about its creators: what motivated, inspired, or influenced them? What was their story? It is these people that bring colour and substance to garden history. I remember my first visit to the magnificent Sissinghurst in Kent (see p.118), one of the most famous gardens in England. I loved it, but I wanted to know more about its makers; I could not see any divide between the creators, Vita Sackville-West

and her husband Harold Nicolson, and the garden they created. Harold: master of structure and formality, creating the “bones” of Sissinghurst. Vita: the genius plantswoman, filling it with schemes that are by turns romantic and restrained. His sense of dignity – born of his military background and his discretion in his affairs with men – pervades the garden’s design, while her outrageous personal life – which included very public affairs with the writers Virginia Woolf and Violet Trefusis – is reflected in the garden’s vibrant hues and thrilling abundance.

Sissinghurst is just one example of how a garden is rarely its creator’s sole passion. Throughout history, gardens have been marked by the concerns of their makers, be these political, cultural, social, artistic, or gender-related. The formal gardens of the 17th century were heavily influenced by spectacular French and Italian styles (see p.32) and the need for men to wield power over nature (see p.14). These were succeeded by the English landscape gardens (see p.40), in which formality was swept away in a bid to create an Arcadian dream inspired by the

*A statue of Dionysus stands in the Nuttery at Sissinghurst in Kent, where gorgeous woodland planting emerges in spring*





Grand Tour (see p.48) and Italian landscape paintings. These 18th-century gardens were status symbols, intended to underline their owners' cultural sensitivity. But what is rarely, if ever, discussed is that many new houses and gardens constructed during this period were funded by colonial expansion – money made from cotton, sugar, or tobacco produced by slavery, or from the trade in the enslaved people themselves. The experiences of these people were a far cry from the bucolic delights demanded by their enslavers.

Women, too, are largely ignored in garden history. It was not until the 20th century that women were recognized as serious garden makers, with the likes of Gertrude Jekyll (see p.106), Beatrix Havergal (see p.127), and Vita Sackville-West (see p.119) leading the charge. The modern era also saw new ways of living come to the fore. As the country became more industrialized, the need for green spaces in urban areas became urgent, pioneered in the public parks of the 19th century by designers such as John Claudius Loudon (see p.84). The 20th century saw the democratization of gardens, with council houses and Garden Cities offering everyday folk their own patch of land (see p.134), while the new media of radio

and television explained what to do with them (see p.139).

Today, garden design has never looked healthier, with fresh-faced stars, innovative ideas, and new – and old – influences all in the mix, but it must also reckon with the unprecedented challenges posed by climate change. This is inspiring some truly exciting solutions, from the vertical gardens of London's Mayfair (see p.205) to the sustainable Cambridge Central Mosque (see p.203) and the urban greening projects of Sheffield (see p.202).

Gardens are fascinating and wonderful however you choose to engage with them. They can simply be beautiful, but they can also tell us so much about the world we live in and the history of our culture. We are always being told that this garden is genius, or that one is insignificant, but I have always believed there is only one interpretation that matters, and that is your own.

I believe, too, that garden history should be accessible. So please use this book as you wish: as a buffet of information, as inspiration, or as a guide to enjoying a garden experience for yourself. Above all, it seeks to entice others onto the garden-history journey. I hope it sparks many further adventures for you.

**top left** Beatrix Havergal with her students at the Chelsea Flower Show, 1950; **top right** The famous herbaceous border at Havergal's gardening college, Waterperry; **bottom right** Portrait of Gertrude Jekyll, 1912; **bottom left** Jekyll's fabulous South Border at Munstead Wood, Surrey

# Artists and gardens

“One needs years of patience to make a garden;  
one needs deeply to love it...”

*Vita Sackville-West, House & Garden, 1950*

Throughout the centuries gardens have been an intriguing subject for art, and many artists in turn have graduated to garden making, not least the main protagonists of the English Landscape Movement, William Kent, Lancelot “Capability” Brown, and Humphry Repton, all of whom began as painters. However, it was only in the 20th century that the two became inextricably linked when the artist-gardener came into being, forming artistic communities and creating gardens as part of their creative ethos.

## Charleston

In England it was primarily the Bloomsbury Group who would create their own sanctuary – from the city, from the wars, from the confines of social and sexual convention – in the form of both art and gardens.

Leading the way were artists and lovers Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, who settled at Charleston in Sussex in 1916. Over the following five decades the house would play host, often for considerable periods of time, to a plethora of painters, writers, and academics who shared their bohemian ideals, including the writer (and Grant’s lover) David Garnett, Bell’s husband Clive, economist John Maynard Keynes, novelist E.M. Forster, writer Lytton Strachey, and art critic Roger Fry.

Charleston was not just a home to the group; it would become their canvas, too. Much like at Benton End (see p.122), the residents would decorate every inch of the house’s interior, before turning their eye to the walled garden, which was created largely by Bell and Grant, in the fashionable cottage garden style within a

semiformal Mediterranean design by Roger Fry. As a follower of William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll, Grant filled the garden with fragrance, form, and luxuriant colour set against contrasting silver foliage, which would inspire not only him and Bell to paint it, but also “visiting” artists like Dora Carrington. The revolutionary mix of styles fostered a unique and tranquil atmosphere that sparked the artists’ creativity.

## Garsington Manor

As well as Charleston, numerous other residences became outposts for the group’s artistic expression. Bell’s sister Virginia Woolf and her husband Leonard lived nearby at Monk’s Cottage, with its inspirational cottage garden, while Virginia Woolf’s lover Vita Sackville-West was creating her own magnificent garden at Sissinghurst in Kent (see p.118), with her husband Harold Nicolson.

The fine Garsington Manor in Oxfordshire would also play host to the Bloomsbury cognoscenti but told a slightly different story. The house was bought in 1914 by the scandalous Lady Ottoline Morrell and her husband, while the garden was restored in the Italian style by Arts and Crafts disciple Charles Mallows. Perhaps more significant, however, was that in 1916 the Morrells invited conscientious objectors, including Clive Bell and Duncan Grant, to work on Garsington’s farm during the war. Food production was considered a valid

alternative to military service – making Garsington a political statement as well as an artistic one.

From William Morris’s Kelmscott Manor, to Rudyard Kipling’s Bateman’s, to the Bloomsbury Group’s retreats, many artists have found great creative allure in their gardens, with some, such as Gertrude Jekyll, even becoming successful garden designers. For these artists, gardens could be sanctuary, muse, and work of art all in one, the basis and inspiration for a life of peace, creativity, beauty, and freedom.

*The Doorway by  
Duncan Grant, 1929,  
capturing a framed  
snapshot of the garden  
at Charleston*





## CASE STUDY

# Sissinghurst

This world-famous garden is known for its themed garden “rooms” that combine geometric form with informal planting.

**W**riter Vita Sackville-West and her husband, diplomat Harold Nicolson, bought Sissinghurst Castle in Kent in 1930. Vita was enchanted by her ancestral links with the place – Thomas Sackville had married the daughter of Sissinghurst’s owner, John Baker, in 1554 – and by its peaceful setting. Together, the amateur horticulturalists set about restoring the derelict property and creating one of the most famous gardens in the world.

### Rooms with a view

Despite leading very separate lives, Harold and Vita adored each other, and the result of their passionate collaboration is a gloriously romantic garden bursting with joie de vivre. It is made up of a series of outdoor “rooms”, with the structure (“walls” and “windows”) provided by Harold, and the planting (“furnishings”) curated by Vita.

The White Garden is the stuff of horticultural legend. It began its life as a rose garden, but developed into what Vita called the “pale garden” in the 1950s. The couple used only white, green, grey, and silver plants, enclosed within yew and box hedging, to create the restrained effect we see today. The South Cottage Garden, by contrast, is exuberant and brightly coloured. This is the rousing view that the couple would wake up to each morning.

Both Vita’s and Harold’s touch is again evident in the newer Rose Garden, with its “tumble of roses and honeysuckle, figs and vines” (in Vita’s words) and the Rondel, a circular hedge that reflects Harold’s military precision and love of geometric shapes. In the Orchard, however, formality is thrown aside and wildness prevails. Hidden paths are mown through tall grasses interspersed with meadow flowers, and roses tumble from apple trees. In the furthest corner stands a gazebo, built in memory of Harold in 1969. This unusual building looks outwards from the moat

*The famous White Garden at Sissinghurst, with mulliganii roses scrambling over a central pergola, and white foxgloves and cosmos threaded through box-lined borders*

**right** *The Rose Garden's circular yew hedge; far right Wallflowers, tulips, and euphorbias in the warm South Cottage Garden; below* *The Delos Garden, a modern re-creation of Vita and Harold's vision of a holiday-inspired Mediterranean garden*



onto the Kent countryside, where the ornamental farm planting (an interpretation by grandson Adam Nicolson and his wife, gardener Sarah Raven, of the farming practices used originally at Sissinghurst) bridges the gap between the garden and its surrounding landscape.

#### **Mediterranean vibe**

After visiting the Greek island of Delos in 1935, Vita and Harold sought to replicate its Mediterranean atmosphere at home but were foiled by the damp climate of Kent and the heavy clay soil.

However, Vita's romantic vision of a garden where ruins were "smothered...by mats of the wild flowers of Greece" has now been masterfully reimagined by head gardener Troy Scott Smith and designer Dan Pearson. In the Delos Garden, they have introduced more robust plant strains, used columns to create the feel of ancient Greek ruins, and reoriented the area so it faces south. Raised beds filled with gravel and a lighter, well-draining soil mix also help the Mediterranean plants to thrive.

Delos is a wonderful addition and illustrates how Vita and Harold continue to influence the garden's development from beyond the grave.