What makes a garden great? This is the first in an occasional series that will seek to understand the popularity of some of the UK’s best-known gardens, looking at their enduring appeal and highlighting ideas that visitors can take home.

Author: Phil Clayton, Features Editor, The Garden. Photography: Neil Hepworth

Sissinghurst Castle Garden

Seen from atop the Tower, the distinctive layout of interconnected areas at Sissinghurst is particularly apparent, as is the much-discussed but effective mix of formal horticulture with informal planting.
Sissinghurst

**History**
- 1305: King Edward sends the night in what is then a Manor House, constructed during the Middle Ages.
- 1560s: Castle is enlarged by the owner, Richard Barker.
- 1756–63: During the Seven Years War the castle becomes a prisoner-of-war camp; later it is divided into homes for farm labourers.
- 1839: The castle, in ruinous state, is bought by author and diplomat Harold Nicolson and his wife Vita Sackville-West, a poet and garden writer. Work starts on the gardens before the house is fully habitable.
- 1938: Garden opened to the public.
- 1950: White Garden planted.
- 1959: Pamela Schwerdt and Vita Sackville-West (see box, above) move into Sissinghurst during the final illness of Adam's father, Nigel Nicolson.
- 1968: National Trust ownership.
- 1970: The Nuttery in Sissinghurst: history

**White Garden planting**

**Visit in May and the strokes of white are subtle, concealed by soft spring growth.** Noble *Polygonatum* (Solomon’s seal) dangles its dainty white bells beside a waterfall of shimmering foliage from a weeping silver pear. In another corner by the Priest’s House, an aged *Wisteria* drapes its racemes of flowers.

By midsummer the monochromatic theme is obvious. Most spectacular is a central arbour clad with a carefully trained, single-flowered *Rosa mulliganii*; elsewhere planting erupts from beds, rocks of *Chamaerion angustifolium* (‘Album’ white willow herb) and *Veronicastrum* shoot skywards, contrasting with voluptuous mounds of *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’.

**Cottage Garden warmth**

Wallflowers and the last tulips bid farewell to spring while the first yellow *Meconopsis cambrica* (Welsh poppy) and scarlet *Aquilegia* hybrids welcome summer. Warm colours blend perfectly with the old walls of South Cottage.

**White Garden in spring**

While more monochromatic in summer, the verdancy of spring warms the White Garden. A highlight is the wisteria clambering over *Vita Sackville-West’s ‘Erectum’* (pierogaldrapes its racemes of flowers. Opposite a venerable wisteria is yet to open its white flowers.

**Yew Walk: an axis of green**

A view down the Yew Walk from the Rose Garden, perfectly trimmed hedges contrast with old bricks and voluptuous planting.

**Perfumed air of the Moat Walk**

Crowned by a quartet of yew in the Cottage Garden behind, this vista leads to the L-shaped water-filled moat that is one of the garden’s boundaries. Underplanted with bluebells, yellow azaleas provide heavy perfume. Opposite a venerable wisteria is yet to open its white flowers.

If I were foolishly enough to suggest a hierarchy of the best British gardens, Sissinghurst Castle Garden in Kent would be close to the top. Those who love the place continue to visit the National Trust-run property in huge numbers – up to almost 200,000 people a year – many with a sense of near-reverence, bewitched by its romance. It is easy to see why. Viewed from above, atop the narrative central tower, the 2ha (5 acre) garden resembles a ribbon of green velvet, woven through and around the surviving remnants of a once vast Elizabethan house. Its lichen-encrusted walls now divide the outside space, but where the aged brickwork ends, contrastingly immaculate partitions of yew begin.

Divisions within Sissinghurst is often said to be a ‘garden of rooms’ but it feels more like an interconnected series of themed set pieces, a quietly theatrical appearance enhanced by effortless contentment quite impossible to simulate. However, familiarity breeds contempt, as the adage goes; visual excitement keeps pace with the visitor, enticing glimpses of one area lead to another, drawing the notion of successional planting flourishes, interest stretched throughout summer. Ideas here could also be translated; how many rose beds could be improved by a leafy underlay of *Pulmonaria*? Viewed as a whole however the garden resembles a ribbon of green velvet, woven through and around the surviving remnants of a once vast Elizabethan house. Its lichen-encrusted walls now divide the outside space, but where the aged brickwork ends, contrastingly immaculate partitions of yew begin.

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The themed planting within the Cottage Garden, while traditional, is a distinctly upbeat blend of orange, red and yellow, a mix of colours common enough in late summer compositions, but rather more surprising as early in the season as May. Fiery tulips and wallflowers are obvious components but, as these fade, colour comes from a wider remaining part of the Elizabethan house, offering splendid views of the garden and the landscape, of which it is increasingly an integral part.

A simple deception

While carefully controlled, restrained planting is a part of the story at Sissinghurst, on my visit many areas seemed softer, more generous and relaxed than I remembered from previous visits, instilling a great feeling of charm. In late spring, little double primrose-flowered 'Canary Bird' cascades from the tower walls, mingling here and there with pink stars of Clematis montana var. rubens, while cushioning the top of an adjoining wall, rather like a living coping stone, stands a classic clump of Trillium grandiflorum that grow well together – in one area, white flowers of Trillium grandiflorum weaves through a glorious expanse of unfttered croziers of fern Matteuccia struthiopteris, while in a drier, rootier area, the lime-green flowers of Euphorbia amygdaloides var. robbiae mingle happily with a red-stemmed Solomon's seal. This is a classic example of choosing the right plants for the right place – in other words, expert horticulture.

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painstakingly bent and tied for ornamental effect. The roses are similarly treated; one of my favourites, *Rosa x odorata* ‘Mutabilis’, its delicate single flowers of orange aging to pink, is usually free-standing and slightly scruffy but on a wall by the Tower it looks far smarter.

For the most discerning plantspeople there are treats, too: a flourishing clump of scarlet-flowered *Rhodophiala advena*, hardy in the Cottage Garden, protected by a clipped cube of box, or, just down the path the blowzy double blooms of *Papaver ‘Fire Ball’* intermingled with the blue trails of *Tropaeolum polyphyllum* (its egg-yolk-yellow flowers will appear later in the season).

A broader view
There is a great danger of inadvertently assuming that once you have visited a garden, it stands still, especially in cases of gardens kept by large institutions such as the National Trust (or the RHS). This is a mistake I have made, but of course as circumstances and staff change (a case in point is new Head Gardener Troy Scott-Smith, starting this spring), so too do the gardens.

While the National Trust owns Sissinghurst, the house is a home to Adam Nicolson (grandson of Vita and Harold), his wife plantswoman Sarah Raven and their family. In recent years Adam’s interest in the farm and landscape in which the garden sits has helped shape the way it is managed, better in tune with traditional techniques, as described in his splendid book *Sissinghurst: an Unfinished History*. He said to me of Sissinghurst: ‘It has a ring-like structure, the ruined Elizabethan palace at its heart, garden, farm buildings, fields and eventually the Weald of Kent beyond. To remove a ring is to diminish what remains. The garden makes best sense when you are in it: this is a place in which to be enveloped, an experience rather more than a simple display’.

So visit again, perhaps choosing a time when crowds are thinner, and see the garden for what it is as a whole. The latest horticultural fads may not be here but the ideas on display adapt to the times. Some gardeners pick holes in anything but I do not know a garden with a better sense of place, that is more complete or satisfying and has had greater influence than Sissinghurst Castle Garden.

**Design elements**

The interplay of planting and architectural detail is key at Sissinghurst Castle Garden. The Moat Walk wall is topped by lead urns around which wisteria weaves. A houseleek-filled stone planter is pivotal in the Herb Garden. Roses and clematis cascade fluently from the Tower. A statue of the Virgin Mary adds serenity to the White Garden.

**A study in green**

There are many areas of planting at Sissinghurst that would translate well to private gardens. For a moist, partially shaded border, try this green and yellow early summer planting. Yellow-flowered *Trollius x cultorum* and a primrose *Iris innominata* blend well with rounded foliage of *Asarum europaeum* and the vibrant lime-green flowerheads of *Euphorbia polychroma*. These grow below a pale yellow-flowered *Cytisus*.

**Visiting details**

**Address**
Sissinghurst Castle, Biddenden Road, near Cranbrook, Kent
TN17 2AB
**Tel:** 01580 710700.

**Website:** [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sissinghurst-castle](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sissinghurst-castle)

**Garden open:**
1 March–3 November; 11am–5.30pm.

**Facilities:** restaurant and shop on site. Disabled parking and mobility buggy available. Note on some days in summer the garden can get especially busy.