

# *Never-Ending Story*

One of the 20th century's most influential gardens, and considered by many to be the epitome of English garden design, Sissinghurst continues to evolve and champion change

**WORDS** Karen Booth **PHOTOGRAPHY** National Trust Images/Andrew Butler & Chris Davies





**THESE PAGES** Around every corner a hidden gem beckons, such as the new Delos garden, shown at the top of this page, and the famed White Garden, pictured top of opposite page.

Endlessly engaging, ever-evolving and considered a benchmark for garden-making, Sissinghurst Castle Garden in Kent is one of the most visited — and written about — gardens in the world. The perfect pairing of formal structure with informal planting, this garden in England’s south-east is as absorbing as it is inspiring.

“England is steeped in history and Sissinghurst Castle offers its fair share, from its Saxon pig farm origins to its magnificent Tudor buildings that imprisoned French sailors during the Seven Years’ War that started in 1756. Given the garden as it stands today is one of England’s finest, it’s hard to imagine that when Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson purchased Sissinghurst in the 1930s, no-one wanted the property. In fact, it lay empty and on the market for two years, falling heavily into disrepair,” says Steve Warner, an Australian landscape designer who visited the garden with his family during the English summer.

“Vita was mesmerised by its chaotic, rundown nature. With Harold imposing a structured design, softened by Vita’s at times over-generous planting style, the rejuvenation of the garden was a passion project that was personally tended by the duo. It is now in the hands of a team of talented gardeners and volunteers determined to maintain Sissinghurst’s reputation for unique and timeless planting schemes.

“When you arrive at the main castle garden entrance, you are overwhelmed by the sense of history, grandeur, and excitement about what awaits. With so many garden rooms to explore, from the South Cottage Garden with its riot of glorious colours to the Herb Garden with its array of tempting edibles, it’s almost impossible to capture all that Sissinghurst has to offer in a single visit. Nonetheless, I suggest you take it slow, stopping to sit and reflect as you move around the garden.

“Truly great gardens provide offerings for all and for me, the highlight was a stroll along the Moat Walk, flanked by what remains of an Elizabethan wall. On one side there are Mollis azaleas; on the other, white Japanese wisteria. The walk delivers you to a bespoke gazebo which gently perches over the bank of the moat. Here you can pause a moment to take in the water reflection and watch the ‘water boatman’ skim across the moat’s smooth surface, making it a true English summer experience.”

Sissinghurst’s tower is another must-see, providing the ideal platform from which to take in the complete garden. “You ascend a spiral staircase, passing Vita’s personal writing room and library on the first floor.



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## *A dream realised*

Delos, completed in 2021, could be regarded as a dream come true. Impressed by a visit to the island of Delos in 1935, Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson had, some years later, tried to establish an area that would evoke the feeling of the much-loved Greek isle. However, the Kent climate, combined with their unfamiliarity with Mediterranean planting, meant it was a vision never fully realised. The current garden team resurrected and reimagined that dream, delivering Delos — a garden that is quite a departure from Sissinghurst’s other garden rooms.

Using a series of drystone walls, gently elevated beds were created to capture the southern sun. These beds were supplied with new, free-draining soil suited to the Mediterranean species they house. Plants were selected to create the desired ambience and with climate change in mind. This meant they needed to be able to thrive despite England’s wetter winters and drier summers, and require no irrigation once established.

Strategically placed trees, including a cork oak, Judas tree and specimen pomegranate, provide height and allow light into the space. Mid-level evergreen structure is provided by such plants as cistus, thyme and lavender. Open areas are populated by annuals and short-lived perennials. Delos is a stellar example of how even the most established and renowned gardens can continue to evolve — and it’s a source of inspiration for dry-climate gardeners everywhere.

When you get to the top of the tower, the elevation allows you to truly understand the layout of not just each garden room, but how the gardens interlink,” says Steve.

“On exiting the tower, you take a short stroll across the manicured Tower Lawn to the White Garden, which is on the other side of a brick wall and accessed via Bishop’s Gate. Created in 1949, the White Garden was a shared vision between Vita and Harold and is simply stunning with its classic lines and tonal layers of white, grey, green and silver. To me, gardens are about personal engagement, so to visit the White Garden with my mother was an opportunity to create an unforgettable shared memory.”

The White Garden has long-been a visitor favourite. Its limited palette makes this a very calming space and demonstrates how interest can be created with plant texture and shape — it also offers a distinct contrast to the more effusive parts of the garden, such as the South Cottage Garden which showcases sunset-coloured blooms. Today’s White Garden uses a mix of perennials, annuals, and roses — the centrepiece being an ornate metal arbour



covered in a white rambling rose. Shrubs provide both volume and structure.

For many, roses are synonymous with classic English country gardens, which is why the romantic Rose Garden is another popular destination. Offering a heady mix of heavenly hues and fragrances, there are around 150 rose varieties — some draped over arches, some wrapped around poles, others cascading from walls, and yet others standing proud in garden beds.

While Steve was enamoured of the garden rooms created by Vita and Harold, he was just as impressed by the “explosion of colour” in the ‘no dig’ vegetable garden that was established in 2008. “Yes, it’s the total opposite of the seasonal flowering borders we expect of Sissinghurst, but don’t leave without taking it in,” he says. “This constantly evolving addition to the Sissinghurst Castle experience provides a smorgasbord of historical varieties of pumpkin, root vegetables and surprises from the trial beds. Every morning the plots are harvested and barrow loads are used in the onsite cafe.”

If time allows, adds Steve, a gentle stroll through The Orchard is also recommended. Embraced by Tudor walls, this is a relaxing space with apple trees and winding paths

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cut through long grass. Bulbs planted in the grass provide seasonal displays, including crocus in autumn, snowdrops in winter, and daffodils in spring. And if you’re looking for ideas on dry-climate gardening, the newly-opened, Mediterranean-themed Delos garden should be added to your itinerary.

For Steve, Sissinghurst isn’t just an incredible historical garden. “It’s a living example of how two people created something that was personal to them, which has since blossomed into a place of learning, inspiration and connection for the many people who visit every year,” he says. “Thank you Vita and Harold for the gift that just keeps giving.”

■ **Sissinghurst Castle Garden,**  
**[nationaltrust.org.uk/sissinghurst](https://nationaltrust.org.uk/sissinghurst)**

**THESE PAGES** From the charming Moat Walk, shown bottom of opposite page, to the view from the tower, as pictured above, Sissinghurst is awash with visual delights.