

Natural Attraction

A destination favoured by garden designers and horticulturists from around the globe, historically significant Great Dixter garden in East Sussex is a showcase for plant experimentation and biodiversity

WORDS Karen Booth **PHOTOGRAPHY** Getty Images & Shutterstock





The plant-abundant English garden style continues to hold Australians in its thrall, with gardens like Great Dixter in East Sussex proving a magnet. For Australian landscape designer Steve Warner, time spent exploring the verdant, much lauded landscaped grounds was not just a true pleasure; it was an opportunity to ponder how traditional planting approaches could be adapted to create biodiverse, climate-appropriate English-style gardens back home.

“As a landscape designer, I am always looking to be inspired: either by new ideas or by reflecting on the past,” says Steve. “When I had the chance during a family holiday to visit the incredible garden spaces that envelope Great Dixter — the family home of the late, legendary gardener and writer Christopher Lloyd — I jumped at it. When your job is a joy, and you spend your holiday doing the things you love and seeking inspiration, you feel very fortunate.

“Lloyd was a passionate plantsman who devoted his life to creating one of the most experimental, truly exciting and constantly changing ornamental gardens of our time. I was privileged to experience the garden in its second chapter, under the care of head gardener Fergus Garrett, who challenges us on how we see and engage with our gardens.”

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Garrett, who worked closely with Lloyd from 1992 until his death in 2006, went on to become the Chief Executive of the Great Dixter Charitable Trust. He is considered a visionary with a passion for environmental management and organic gardening, a real knack for inspired plant combinations, as well as an ability to honour the past while embracing the future.

“Great Dixter uniquely combines the incredible history of a 15th-century home nestled within a small estate while also being a thriving centre of biodiversity — not just horticultural diversity but ecological, as well. No wonder Great Dixter is a must-see for all green-thumbs,” says Steve.

“On arrival via the front meadow, you’re immediately drawn towards the main house and stunning entrance porch. This is flanked by swirling, cloud-pruned hedges that act as a backdrop to the seasonal

THESE PAGES Great Dixter is known for its bold colour choices and adventurous attitude toward foliage and texture. It also offers a Sunken Garden with a formal pond that is a visitor favourite.

heroes of the garden, the magnificent hostas. An array of eclectic pots overflow with foliage and flowers, and hint about what to expect as you explore the rest of the garden, strolling along the aged flagstone pathways and passing by low hedges and brimming border plantings.

“I visited in summer and the riot of colour was, at times, almost overwhelming. The borders were just bursting with yellows, whites and purples, but when you stopped and looked closer, you found the delicate petals of poppies and buttercups dotted throughout the massed plantings.”

Great Dixter has long been lauded for its distinctive approach to plant colour, eschewing pastels in favour of something bolder, its adventurous attitude towards foliage and texture, and its sometimes untamed look, due, in part, to plants that are allowed to self-seed. Belying the horticultural expertise that ensures the garden’s success, it looks uncontrived and has an exuberance which can be seen at every turn, especially in the Long Border that is a picture of abundance from May to September.

While nature is largely encouraged to fully express itself, there are some more restrained elements, such as the ‘signature’ yew topiaries (some topped with peacocks) that date back to Lloyd’s father’s time, and the traditional yew hedges.

A landscape of many parts, it embraces not just the main house (the original Mediaeval home was renovated and enlarged in the early 1900s by Sir Edwin Lutyens) but various outbuildings. “The Sunken Garden is the winner, in my humble opinion,” says Steve. “This is surrounded by the Barn Garden and the stone paving, aged brick and barn timbers are tactile and enticing. One barn wall acts as an aged canvas for heavy-cropping espaliered Brunswick figs and majestic apples. At the centre is a formal pond teeming with aquatic plants.

“Wherever you roam at Great Dixter during the heady summer months, the busy bumblebees are drunk on nectar and appear en masse,” he adds. “This is a garden that reinforced to me that the once-traditional view that ornamental gardens do not support biodiversity is not true. It also cemented my view that every raised planter, garden bed and border counts. If managed correctly, ornamental gardens can play a vital role in habitat protection and allow us all to have our own small Great Dixter.”

■ **Great Dixter House & Gardens,** greatdixter.co.uk

