

# The garden at Sissinghurst Castle, Kent

BY DEBORAH NEVINS



Pl. I. The Elizabethan tower at Sissinghurst Castle, Kent. The garden was laid out by Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962) and her husband, Harold Nicolson (1886–1968), between 1930 and 1939 and planted by 1950. It is now the property of the National Trust. Photographs are by the author.

RARELY DOES A subtle and highly sophisticated work of art receive broad public acclaim, but such is the case with the garden at Sissinghurst Castle, in Kent, the most visited garden in the world after Versailles. But an even more telling tribute to its beauty is the fact that it is a gardener's garden. Sophisticated gardeners come to Sissinghurst to learn, and find themselves dazzled by the imagination of the two extraordinary personalities who created it—Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Sir Harold Nicolson. They were aristocratic, intellectual, nonconformist, and complicated. The tale of their long, eccentric marriage and Vita Sackville-West's intense relationship with Virginia Woolf was chronicled in a highly successful book by their son Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*, published in 1973.

Vita Sackville-West grew up at Knole, near Sissinghurst, one of the most beautiful houses in England. She wrote prose, poetry, fiction, and history, as well as no-nonsense gardening columns in the *London Observer* between 1947 and 1961.<sup>1</sup> Her husband, a descendant of the eighteenth-century architect Robert Adam, was born in Tehran, the son of a diplomat. Following in the family tradition, Harold Nicolson began his professional life in the foreign service but in 1929 he turned full time to writing and journalism; on occasion his articles appeared in the same issues of the *Observer* as his wife's.

Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson were married in 1913 in the chapel at Knole, and they ended their honeymoon in Constantinople where Nicolson was posted. There they began their involvement with gardening in the long neglected garden of the house they acquired. They returned to England in 1914 and the following spring they bought Long Barn, near Sevenoaks, Kent, where their interest in gardening developed into a passion. In the fifteen years they lived at Long Barn they schooled themselves in horticulture and developed a very distinctive approach to garden design. When they bought Sissinghurst on May 7, 1930, they could apply what they had learned to create a masterpiece. Today the garden is the property of the National Trust.

Throughout her life Vita Sackville-West resented the fact that because she was a woman, she could not inherit Knole. When she found the group of dilapidated buildings on rubble-strewn grounds which was Sissinghurst, she was partly influenced to buy it by discovering that the family which owned Sissinghurst was related to her own. In 1554 the daughter of Sir John Baker (d. 1558) of Sissinghurst married Sir Thomas Sackville (1536–1608), first earl of Dorset, and in 1566 the earl's cousin Queen Elizabeth gave him Knole.

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Sissinghurst was a complex which had grown and crumbled with time. When the Nicolsons acquired it, it included the Elizabethan tower in which Vita Sackville-West made her study (Pl. I), a section of the Elizabethan house, an Elizabethan priest's house (see Pl. VI), and the low range of Tudor buildings that now borders the west side of the garden. The pond at the eastern end of the garden is a remnant of the moat that originally surrounded the buildings. As soon as they acquired the property the Nicolsons set to work on the garden. It was largely finished by 1939, except for the famous white garden, which was planned then but not planted until the winter of 1949 and 1950 (see Fig. 1).

The Nicolsons' marriage was difficult but their collaboration on the garden at Sissinghurst seems to have been easy. It matched his talent for conceptualizing space with her sensibility for color, thirst for learning about plants, and romantic imagination. They agreed on their aesthetic approach to the garden, which contrasted a highly structured organization of space with a profuseness of flowers and foliage planted with studied informality. Color has a dominant role. Tints of the same hue grouped progressively from light to dark is the most common arrangement (see Pl. V). However, in this regard, the Nicolsons differed somewhat in their taste. Vita Sackville-West preferred muted colors while her husband was attracted to primary and other bright colors. Her sensibility predominated at Sissinghurst

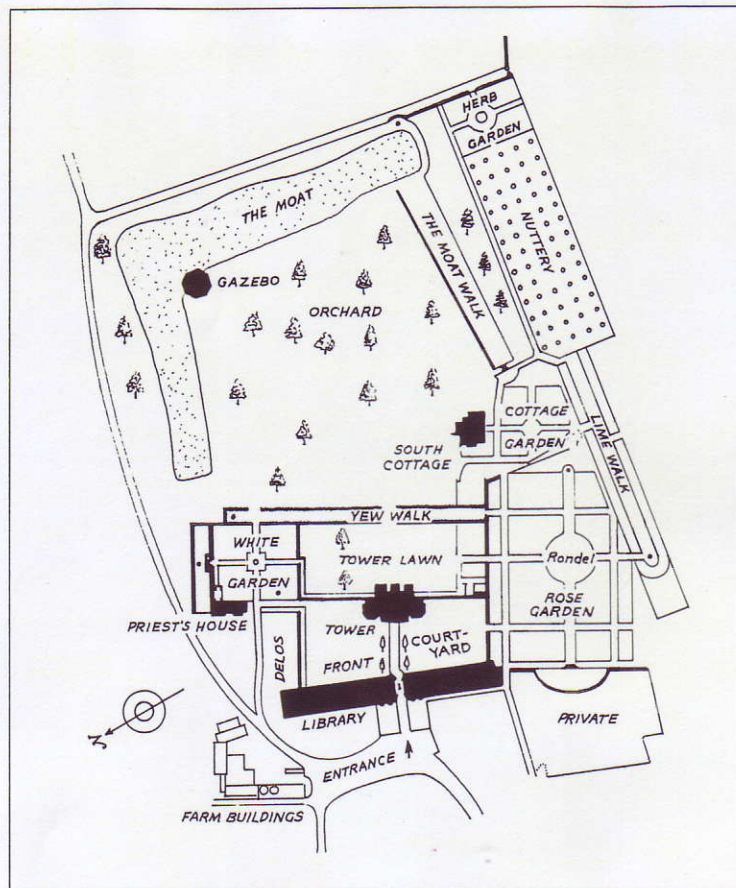


Fig. 1. Plan of Sissinghurst Castle, Kent. Drawing by Robert Cihl.

Pl. II. View of the garden from the tower.







Pl. III. This iron doorway separates two of the garden rooms.

except for the lime walk, with its spring bulbs of yellow, red, white, blue, and pink, and the cottage garden, planted throughout the summer with bright yellow, orange, and red flowers (Pls. XI and XII).

Another principle on which they concurred was that the garden should have a decidedly English character, which translated into green lawns, water, and hedges, the elements that form the bones of Sissinghurst. Englishness also meant using plants such as old roses, columbines, and daffodils, which were traditionally associated with cottage gardens, medieval manuscripts and tapestries, or with Shakespeare and Chaucer.

The garden at Sissinghurst is actually composed of a series of gardens arranged along a number of axes and divided from one another by brick walls or walls of green—either yew or hornbeam. A statue or an urn is often placed at the end of a vista to catch the eye and emphasize the organization of the space. Vita Sackville-West herself described the garden as the rooms of an enormous world opening off arterial corridors. The idea of rooms is emphasized by the fact that the openings between the gardens are framed, as if by moldings, by climbing plants, suggesting that they are to be conceived of as doors, not simply as openings. In some instances an iron or other metal gate closes the opening, reinforcing the idea of doors between rooms (Pl. III). This arrangement provides privacy, and at the same time allows for an element of surprise. For instance, after passing through the tower vestibule one enters the tower lawn, which is bounded on the far side by a yew hedge with an opening through which one glimpses the orchard and pond beyond (Fig. 2); but when one goes through the door and looks left or right, one unexpectedly finds oneself not in the orchard, but in a long narrow passageway with high walls of yew (Pl. IV).



Pl. IV. View looking northeast in the yew walk.



Pl. V. The purple border is planted along the northeast wall of the tower lawn.



A single theme dominates the design of each of the garden rooms. Usually the theme is color, sometimes it is a specific plant group, but neither is rigidly held to. The rose garden (Pls. IX and X) and the white garden (Pls. VI-VIII) are supremely beautiful examples of the theme approach. The former is a study in subtle tones of pink, rose, and violet, like the colors of old damask; but it also contains other harmonious colors, as well as plants other than

roses. Yellow-green *Alchemilla mollis*, gray-leaved *Nepeta mussini*, pink dianthus, lavender, iris, giant alliums, clematis, and salvia all play against the old shrub and climbing roses, creating a sensuous, romantic environment.

As the rose garden is not a rose garden in the strictest sense, so the white garden is not literally white, but a tapestrylike juxtaposition of grays, silvers, and light green against white. *Artemisia* and

Pl. VI. This aerial view of the white garden shows the Elizabethan priest's house at the left and the yew walk at the right. The white roses in the center are grown over a frame.







Pl. VII. Calla lilies and iceberg roses growing in the white garden.

*Stachys lanata*, both plants with gray leaves, and dark green box set off the intense, clean whites and solid textures of iceberg roses and calla lilies and the snowlike effect of *Gypsophila paniculata* (babies'-breath) and *Crambe cordifolia* (see Pl. VII). In one corner stands the majestic white *Lilium cardocrinum giganteum*, more than six feet tall, and in another shimmers the silver-leaved pear, *Pyrus salicifolia pendula* (Pl. VIII).

For all its beauty and originality the garden at Sissinghurst is nonetheless tied to garden history, and particularly to gardening polemics of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. The Nicolson's read the works of William Robinson (see Fig. 3), Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) and E. A. Bowles (1865-1954), among others, and admired their gardens. They were clearly influenced by Robinson's *English Flower Garden* of 1883 and his



Pl. VIII. At the end of this walk in the white garden is a silver frost weeping pear (*Pyrus salicifolia pendula*), in front of which stands a twentieth-century lead statue of a virgin by the Yugoslavian sculptor Toma Rosandic (b. 1876).



Pl. IX. The carefully ordered arrangement of the planting beds in the rose garden is softened by the profusion of flowers.



other writings, in which he convinced the public to give up the rigidly geometric gardens of the Victorian period that were planted with annuals raised each year in greenhouses. Instead, he recommended planting perennials in informal gardens patterned on the ways in which plants grow in large drifts in fields and by the waterside. He suggested the use of flowering hedges, naturalized meadows planted with wildflowers and bulbs, roses trained to climb

through trees, and he preferred the use of species plants and of trees and shrubs associated with England, namely yew, holly, and oak.

The Nicolsonson learned from Robinson largely through his writings since he designed few gardens other than his own at Gravetye Manor in Sussex. Gertrude Jekyll, however, not only wrote about gardens but designed more than three hundred of them, nearly one hundred in collaboration with Sir

Pl. X. Light green *Alchemilla mollis* (lady's-mantle), seen here with dianthus and roses in the rose garden, was one of Vita Sackville-West's favorite flowers.







Pl. XI. The cottage garden is designed around the colors yellow, red, and orange.

Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944). It was unquestionably from Jekyll that Vita Sackville-West learned about color, and it was perhaps the gray garden Jekyll described in *Colour Schemes for the Flower Garden* (1908) which suggested the white garden of Sissinghurst. Jekyll was inspired by the writings of John Ruskin on painting, to look to nature as a model for the use of color; and also by the scientific analysis of Michel Eugène Chevreul, who published his ob-

servations on the psychology of color at the turn of the nineteenth century. She prescribed the use of combinations of colors of the same intensity and of large flower borders whose colors were arranged according to the spectrum.

The garden of Hidcote Manor in Gloucestershire, laid out in 1905 by the American expatriate Lawrence Johnston, was most probably another influence on Sissinghurst. Hidcote, which Vita Sackville-



Pl. XII. Four majestic yews surround an urn in the cottage garden.



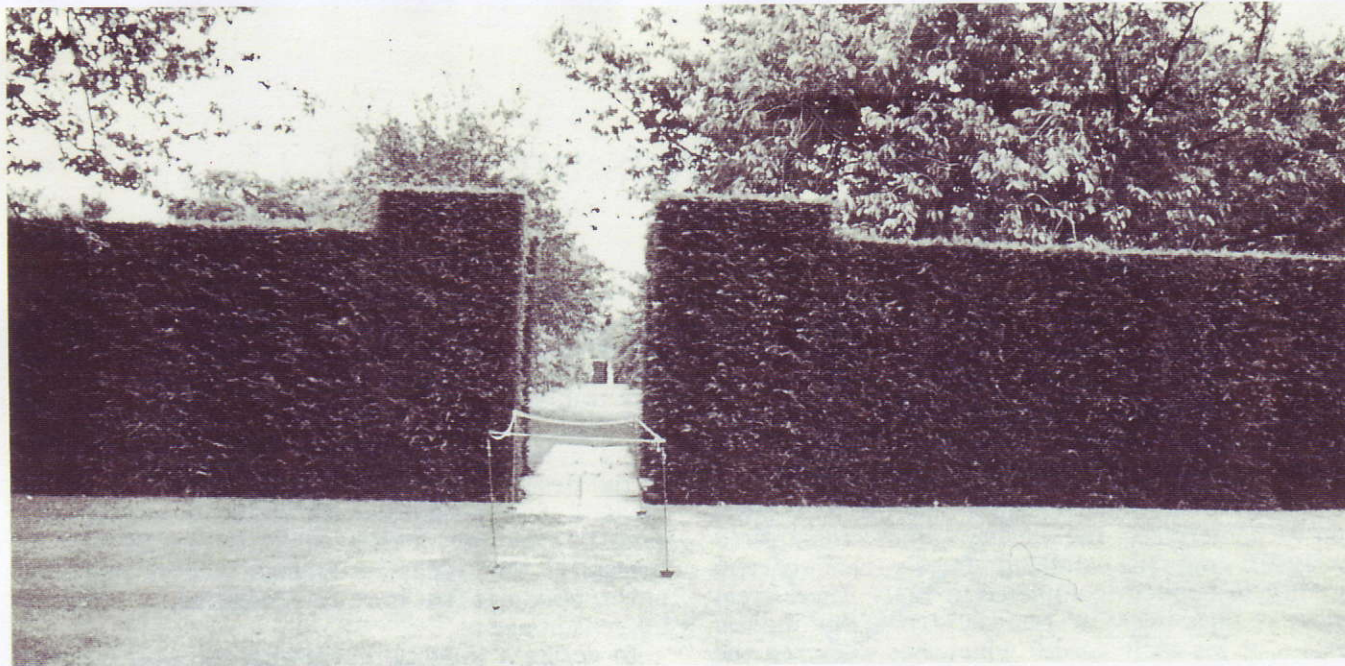


Fig. 2. View from the tower lawn toward the orchard.

West wrote about in the *Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society* in 1949, was organized as a series of garden rooms off a long corridor of green lawn.

The greatness of Sissinghurst lies, however, not in its conversation with history, but in its romantic beauty. The poetry of the garden and the vision of its principal designer is obvious in Vita Sackville-West's description of her plans for the white garden:

I hope you will survey a low sea of grey clumps of foliage, pierced here and there with tall white flowers. I visualize the white trumpets of dozens of Regale lilies, grown three years ago from seed, coming up through the grey of southernwood and artemisia and cotton-lavender, with grey-and-

white edging plants such as *Dianthus* Mrs. Sinkins and the silvery mats of *Stachys lanata*, more familiar and so much nicer under its English names of Rabbits' Ears or Saviour's Flannel.... I cannot help hoping that the great ghostly barn-owl will sweep silently across a pale garden, next summer, in the twilight—the pale green garden that I am now planting, under the first flakes of snow.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Many of Vita Sackville-West's writings have been published in anthologies, among them *V. Sackville-West's Garden Book*, ed. Philippa Nicolson (New York, 1968); *A Joy of Gardening*, ed. Hermine I. Popper (New York, 1958); *In Your Garden Again* (London, 1951); and *More for Your Garden* (London, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *V. Sackville-West's Garden Book*, pp. 16–17.

Fig. 3. William Robinson (1838–1935) illustrated this typical cottage garden in his *English Flower Garden*, 5th ed. (London, 1896), Pl. 27. He admired such cottage gardens for their abundance of old-fashioned flowers and great informality.

