



Roses clothe the walls

I'm ashamed to say that I haven't managed to get to the National Trust's Sissinghurst Castle Garden in Kent for many a year. Timed tickets and crowds of visitors, up to ten thousand a day at times, have put me off. However I was very interested in a talk given last year by Troy Scott Smith, the Head Gardener.

Troy is the first male Head Gardener in recent years. He follows a distinguished line of ladies including Pam Schwerdt and Sibylle Kretzberger (1959–1991), Sarah Cook (1991–2004) and Alexis Datta (2004–2013). Male Head Gardener Jack Vass worked for Vita from 1939,

went to war, returned in 1946 and restored the garden with her. Jack stayed until 1957 before going to Borde Hill in Sussex.

Troy began his gardening career at Sissinghurst straight after Askham Bryan College, working under Sarah Cook from 1992 to 1997.



The Rose Garden in June

The Learning Curve

Val Bourne

He used to be at The Courts garden at Holt near Bradford-on-Avon, another National Trust property. This was one of my favourite gardens because it wasn't the usual planting by numbers. In August, for instance, Japanese anemones would mingle with hardy fuchsias in a narrow strip lining a path and they looked fabulous until late in the year. It was simple, yet very effective, and he resisted the urge to add more, although there were bulbs in the spring.

One of the themes of Troy's talk on Sissinghurst was restoring the rural setting and capturing the spirit of Sissinghurst. Garden designer Arne Maynard refers to this as the *genius loci* and it's all about atmosphere. A country garden should pay homage to its setting and be planted

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Many of these perennials will be removed to make way for more roses.

in an entirely different way from a roof garden in Kensington designed for entertaining smart people. Sissinghurst's farm pond is to be reinstated and, in front of the house, tarmac will be replaced by grass. Visitors will be greeted by grazing cows.

Designer Dan Pearson, an artistic, gentle personality, is involved in the design and it's to be hoped that Vita's enthusiastic and free-spirited style will return. It's said that Sissinghurst had become too manicured and restrained, and Adam Nicholson inferred that he preferred the box topiary to have summer fuzz, as it had in Vita's day; Troy's ambition is to restore that free spirit and exuberance.

The most interesting aspect of the talk concerned the Rose Garden because Troy has pledged to let it drip with roses in June and July and then allow it to fade – though some roses will flower again but not as dramatically. He felt it had become a garden for every season and that had meant fewer roses and less of a spectacle in June and July, when it was supposed to peak. Vita collected old-fashioned roses and admired many that flowered only once. She planted two hundred different named roses, a hundred of which had been removed but are now being reinstated. Some were identified by old metal labels found in a pond.

Once-only flowering roses are fabulous. The late Peter Beales loved these abundant

roses much more than repeat-flowering ones. Vita apparently liked dusky roses such as 'Charles de Mills'. Her vision was for 'a tumble of roses and honeysuckle, figs and vines' and she wanted to be 'drunk on roses' in June. I am thoroughly for this approach, of creating a spectacle that peaks and then fades, because I see lots of gardeners trying to make borders that offer something at every stage of the year. This is an impossibility because every plant has its day and the sight of a peony entering dormancy in August, displaying shabby foliage, jars against asters and late-flowering perennials.

There are practical reasons for creating a June and July focus in Sissinghurst's case, because the Rose Garden is over visited. Troy hopes this will spread the visitors into other areas of the 5-acre garden and will allow the York stone paths in the Rose Garden to be replaced by grass paths. In quieter moments, when the roses are over, there should be less footfall.

Spring can be glorious in Kent. When on April 6th 1930 Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson first came to look at Sissinghurst it was the Nuttery that first caught their eye. There Vita and Harold planted lots of bright polyanthus in shades of vivid yellow, red and white; mercifully a fungal infection began to see them off in the 1960s and they were all removed by 1974.



Alliums in the Rose Garden

The hazels were thinned and gentler woodlanders in spring shades of green, white, lime-yellow and blue now create a spring tapestry. *Anemone nemorosa*, primroses, cowslips and violets (*Viola riviniana* Purpurea Group) begin the show in March. They're joined by wood spurge (*Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae*) and the acid-yellow biennial *Smyrniium perfoliatum*. *Veratrum* foliage and deciduous ferns such as *Matteuccia struthiopteris* and *Onoclea sensibilis* along

with a peppering of blue *Omphalodes cappadocica* 'Cherry Ingram' make April special. Clear whites also appear amongst the foliage and *Maianthemum stellatum*, which is daintier but more invasive than *M. racemosum*, white Spanish bluebells, variegated Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum odoratum* 'Variegatum') and *Trillium grandiflorum* can all be seen. In summer occasional bursts of colour are provided by Martagon lilies and hardy orchids or *Dactylorhiza* hybrids.

There are plans to try polyanthus again in the Nuttery, with the possibility of restoring Vita and Harold's gaudy carpet, but I'm rather hoping it won't happen. Bright polyanthus seem more suited to urban park bedding than rural Kent. However, it's a difficult balancing act for The National Trust to conserve an historical garden. I also feel that visitors tend to expect open gardens to look perfect across the board, throughout the year, which is, as we all know, totally unrealistic. 🌸

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