



Sissinghurst: Vita Sackville-West and the Creation of a Garden

Vita Sackville-West , Sarah Raven

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From 1946 to 1957, Vita Sackville-West, the British poet, bestselling author of *All Passion Spent* and maker of Sissinghurst, wrote a weekly column in the Observer depicting her life at Sissinghurst, showing her to be one of the most visionary horticulturalists of the twentieth-century. With wonderful additions by Sarah Raven, a famous British gardener in her own right who is married to Vita's grandson Adam Nicolson, *Sissinghurst* draws on this extraordinary archive, revealing Vita's most loved flowers, as well as offering practical advice for gardeners. Often funny and completely accessibly written with color and originality, it also describes details of the trials and tribulations of crafting a place of beauty and elegance.

Sissinghurst has gone on to become one of the most visited and inspirational gardens in the world and this marvellous book, illustrated with drawings and original photographs throughout, shows us how it was created and how gardeners everywhere can use some of the ideas from both Sarah Raven and Vita Sackville-West. *Sissinghurst* is a magnificent portrait of a garden and a family.

Sissinghurst: Vita Sackville-West and the Creation of a Garden Details

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Eleise says

Wonderful book. I enjoyed the plant descriptions and design suggestions. This is a book about the creation of a garden (one of the most visited in the world) so of course it's going to offer lots of botany and gardening lore and lingo. If you're looking for a biography of Vita, look elsewhere and don't penalize this book for being too heavy on the gardening. Because (stating the obvious) it's a book about a garden.

Frankie says

This is a beautiful book about the creation of the gardens at Sissinghurst, and the two amazing people who created it —Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson. Sarah Raven is married to one of Vita and Harold's grandson's and is a gardener in her own right as well as living at Sissinghurst. She includes a summary of the family history and how the Nicolsons came to purchase the property on which this garden was built.

Vita disliked the extremely formal, pruned-to-an-inch-of-their-lives gardens in which she was brought up, and wanted something different for Sissinghurst. That is, she wanted the garden meticulously planned, but to look as though it had mostly grown up by itself. When her gift for choosing where and how to grow flowers and trees was combined with Harold's talent for planning the layout, Sissinghurst was guaranteed to become an attraction. Sarah Raven reveals that many of the original plants Vita put in over 80 years ago are still there and thriving—but many visitors are unimpressed, but not because the garden is less than they expected. This is due to the desire of the Nicolsons to give the garden a natural look. Their plans were so successful that some do not realize the incredible amount of work that went into, and still goes on to maintain these gardens. Vita also had a finite budget, so while she was able to have a larger garden than most of us can ever hope, her gardening tips are tailored toward affordability as well as beauty.

Filled with beautiful photographs of the creators and their gardens, this book is not only a treat; it's inspiring. I'm looking forward to seeing what I can grow in the coming year.

Diana says

This book is a charming look at an English garden that mixes the old world with the current one and tells the tale of a love for the plants and land of the property. The author mixes the original writings of the first creator of this garden with her own thoughts and facts, making this book a great addition to any shelf.

Laurie says

Sissinghurst is the garden created by Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Harold Nicholson. They bought a Tudor era property that was nearly in ruins (it has a moat! And a tower!), fixed up the buildings without

much modernization, and then, with Harold laying out the hardscape and Vita dealing with the plants themselves, made a garden that became very famous. Sissinghurst is the home of the famous (among gardeners) White Garden. Vita orchestrated a very lush garden, packed with flowers- especially scented flowers- that looked like they had sprung up naturally. Of course, it took a great deal of knowledge –and a couple of full time gardeners- to keep this looking natural.

150,000 people a year visit Sissinghurst to this day. While it has had changes- some plants didn't do well, some just got old- the bones and spirit of the garden Vita created remain in place. Sarah Raven is a garden writer who has had the privilege of living at Sissinghurst for a while- she is married to Vita's grandson. She considers herself the co-author of this book; she has mined Vita's prodigious writings and included passages from them in the text. With this, we can see what Vita was trying to achieve in the garden and it's a very interesting look inside. The book includes many black and white photos of the garden, inside the buildings, and Vita and her family; a few modern day color photos are also included. Very interesting for anyone interested in garden design from the viewpoint of living intimately with the garden 365 days a year.

Sherry Mackay says

I must admit I skipped thru quite a bit of this as it really only relates to very keen gardeners. I did enjoy the snippets about vita and Harold. I loved the photos and the stories about the co-author as she lives and gardens there currently and is married to vita's grandson. Reading this brought back happy memories of our own visit to sissinghurst some years ago. I would only recommend this book though if you love Sissinghurst or gardening.

Julie Durnell says

I received this lovely book through a Goodreads giveaway, my very first "win" actually, and I loved it! The author, a gardener herself, is the wife of Vita's grandson and they currently live at Sissinghurst. Her gardening knowledge coupled with Vita's writings from her column in the Observer and her books was quite enjoyable. This book was informative and delightful, very well researched with historical background and pictures of Vita, her husband Harold and the Sissinghurst estate. The plant recommendations and lists for the different garden areas and seasons was better than a Thompson & Morgan catalog! It was an armchair tour of the gardens in all seasons!

Louise Davy says

A little disappointing but an interesting read, nevertheless. Sarah Raven, author, makes a point then gives a long quote from Vita's own writing making the same point. A little tedious as this happened far too often.

Barbara says

I'm not a gardener, but turned to this book because of my interest in Vita Sackville-West. Vita was a passionate woman in her sex life, her writing and her garden. This book lovingly portrays the passion Vita and her husband, Nigel had for their garden and the creating of it, as well as those returning it to its former glory.

Jennybeast says

I seem to be obsessed with this garden, for no real reason. In any case, I loved this book -- not only as a fascinating look at the history of the building of the garden, and Vita Sackville-West's relationship to it, but as a particularly useful gardening resource. I wasn't expecting so much of the book to be excerpts from her own writing, and I really enjoyed that a lot. Sensitive writing and very engaging. I wanted even more pictures, of course, but it was altogether well done.

Kend says

I really do win the best books from Goodreads giveaways. I don't know how I'm so lucky, but I will never run out of books to read, and I really enjoy the adventure of sashaying into something entirely outside of my comfort zone when it comes to literature. Take Sarah Raven's *Sissinghurst: Vita Sackville-West and the Creation of a Garden*, a grand volume of some 380 pages detailing the history, purchase, planning, planting, maintenance, evolution, and long-term legacy of the internationally-renowned English gardens at Sissinghurst. I had never read much about the Kentish Weald, much less Sissinghurst proper, and I'm something of a complete horticultural failure, so I rather expected to be out of my depth with this book. I am happy to be proved wrong.

Indeed, it's partly the point of this book to lay out Vita Sackville-West's vision for not just her own garden, but the secret gardening capabilities we all keep locked away inside. (Vita is, of course, the co-founder of the Sissinghurst gardens, along with her husband, Harold Nicolson.) The fact that I've killed potted lavender in four states and on two continents makes me exactly the sort of creature with whom Vita has the most to share; she was an experimentalist, feeling her way through the possibilities of soil and verdance by trial and error, and she recorded her successes (and failures) in a weekly column for the *Observer*.

A great deal of the appeal of this book lies in Vita herself, that most elusive of central characters. She was bold and colorful, radically countercultural, and yet still managed to eke out what seems to have been a life of haphazard happiness in the midst of a society that roundly condemned women like her—that is, women who made an experiment of everything, including love. If you've read Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, then you've already read one interpretation of Vita's life. The fact that Woolf and Sackville-West were briefly lovers almost doesn't register in Sarah Raven's *Sissinghurst*, who is much more preoccupied with the fundamentals of the garden itself, and the ways in which its founders' lives intersected with the borders and outdoor 'rooms' which they establish all throughout the garden. When it comes to romance, it is clear that Raven believes the core relationship to be the one Vita and Harold had with the Elizabethan ruins in which they built their home, and their relationship with each other to be a distant second. Harold certainly gave Vita plenty of room for all of her experiments.

There are certainly some elements of *Sissinghurst* that make it a dense and time-consuming read, not least its length. I have no objections to either its length or its density of horticultural details, but I wouldn't suggest attempting to knock through it in one sitting. A gardener might tackle it in a less straightforward fashion than I did, reading it straight through, cover to cover, as one might read a novel. I don't know. But there are chapters I bookmarked for later reference, in case I ever get a hankering to try and grow rose bushes in the frozen rocky wastes of Montana. (Or, you know, have another go at potted lavender.) The color photographs inset throughout the book are lovely to look at, and helpful for placing the various outdoor 'rooms.'

It seems a wonder that such a complete little universe should exist in the woods of Kent without any of us Americans knowing about it, but we should be used to feeling insecure in our self-absorption; the anglophiles among us have already gone adventuring with the good Doctor and the fictional family installed at Highclere Castle. There is something quintessentially British about building a world with very constrained boundaries and expecting others to simply buy into it, believe in it, and inhabit it without question—and then somehow making it *work*. The gardens of Sissinghurst are another example, or Sarah Raven makes them so; it's hard now for me to believe that Sissinghurst could ever have *not* existed. I am completely won over, almost rabid to visit. I would feel somewhat claustrophobic, perhaps—the garden has over 150,000 visitors during its open season—but I should very much like to walk the same paths as the vivid souls who first conjured up the place. And I will most certainly revisit *Orlando* now that I have met, in an oblique fashion, the woman who inspired it.

Sissinghurst: Vita Sackville-West and the Creation of a Garden was released in the United States by St. Martin's Press in November 2014.

[for more of my reviews, visit my blog]

Julie says

This is a beautiful book about the creation of the gardens at Sissinghurst by Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson. It includes a large number of wonderful photographs, many in color although the majority were taken at a time when color film was not in everyday use. I love the lists it includes of Sackville-West's favorite flowers. It breaks down many chapters by season so that gardeners can visualize and learn from what was happening at Sissinghurst at different times of year. I love the inclusion of much of Vita Sackville-West's original writings; her writing is always exquisite!

I received this book as a Goodreads First-reads giveaway and I'm so glad that I did!!

Always Pink says

Wonderful and heartwarming compilation of old and new photographs of the famous garden and its creators, quotes and snippets from Vita's garden books, family memories and observations by Sarah Raven, who is married to one of Vita and Harold's grandsons and has the pleasure to live permanently in Sissinghurst. The book presents the avid gardener with priceless advice on planting schemes, plants and varieties favoured by the couple, and even tells you which of the original plants have survived until today. A whole chapter is devoted to the history of Sissinghurst and its connections to Vita's beloved Knowle. Plans and maps show Harold's design of the garden and how it evolved. I especially liked the chapter on indoor gardening, which shows flower arrangements in the buildings and rooms of Sissinghurst – from the kitchen to Vita's room up

in the tower. A final chapter outlines how the garden and its upkeep as well as its overall look have changed since Harold died.

An ideal present for the countless admirers of Sissinghurst and Vita around the world. I will certainly order a copy for myself.

This has been written on the basis of an advance e-copy kindly provided by the publishers via NetGalley.

Dianna says

This is the story of a garden. Vita Sackville-West and her husband bought the crumbling ruins of Sissinghurst, restored them to a state of livability (although not grandeur by any means), and, most importantly, made the garden into a thing of beauty that thousands of people still visit today. The first three chapters and the last are the story of Vita, the family, the home, and the garden. The rest of the book is chapter after chapter of categorized recommendations of what to plant.

My favorite part was the three sections of color photos. I wish there were ten times as many. The garden is truly beautiful and I enjoyed learning about how it came to be.

I received a review copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads.

Frederico says

I've been to more than 30 countries in many continents, yet Sissinghurst is my favorite place on earth. I mean, good reads in the perfect setting for reading and writing and painting and dreaming...

romney says

Disappointing. This book is a selection of Vita's garden writing put into context by Sarah Raven. Photos are mostly black and white, which is ridiculous in a garden book often concerned with colour. Vita's writing is excellent, but that is all available in previous compilations. Sarah updates her where better cultivars have become available, and groups the writing into sections for scent and so forth. For someone that currently lives at Sissinghurst and is part of the family it is oddly un-illuminating though. I have visited the garden many times and read all Vita's writing on it. I was looking for a real insight, but this could have been written by any good garden writer with a knowledge of Sissinghurst. Also, Sarah clearly has strong opinions about how the garden should be run now and tries to make it sound as if those are Vita's opinions. It just comes off as sour grapes, because the family gave up the garden to the National Trust in the 1960s and have no control over it. I feel sorry for her, but hoped for a great deal more from the book.
