

Sarah Cook

Sissinghurst's one-time head gardener on how a chance encounter in a fishmonger's shop set her on a journey from rebel without a cause to the saviour of Cedric Morris's irises

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When she was young Sarah Cook was the girl who always sat at the back of the class, a bit naughty, slightly disruptive, sometimes rebellious but masses of fun and full of energy. That energy was harnessed into a journey that led her to become head gardener of Sissinghurst Castle and to champion irises bred by the artist Cedric Morris. Listening to her recount her life, I get the sense that wherever she went, both the fun and the rebelliousness went along with her.

Sarah grew up on her parent's Suffolk fruit farm. "We were outdoors all the time. I've always been a country girl and am happiest outdoors," she says. "Even at a young age I was a tiny bit argumentative and always knew what I wanted."

After school Sarah took a year out (this was the late 1960s, long before the gap year became ubiquitous) to spend three months in Venice and to hitchhike around Europe before studying geography at New Hall College, Cambridge. The paths for geography graduates led either into teaching or into town planning, neither of which appealed to Sarah so for a period she drifted from waitressing to working in a fish shop while she mulled over her future.

As she was closing the fishmonger one Friday she confided to a customer that she did not know what to do with her life. "She sat me down there and then and said 'OK, let's work it out.'" The pair talked and decided that what would make Sarah most happy would be to be a gardener. That chance encounter and conversation over the wet fish counter changed her life. "I went to work in a garden on the edge of Bodmin Moor for three years as a trainee gardener, happy as Larry."

From Bodmin Sarah went to work at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. "Not on the posh student course," she says, "but working as a gardener with lots of training." After Kew Sarah got the job of an under gardener at Sissinghurst Castle where she first met Jim Marshall, then the National Trust gardens' adviser who many years later would become her husband. After four years at Sissinghurst she was asked to become head gardener at Upton House where, she later learned, the gardeners were appalled by the idea of a female head gardener.

"I was really sad to leave Upton House but the offer of head gardener at Sissinghurst came up and I couldn't refuse it. Pam and Sibylle [Pamela Schwerdt and Sibylle Kreutzberger, her predecessors as joint head gardeners] spent a lot of time talking to me about the thinking behind the garden and they were

generous, brilliant, brilliant gardeners and I learned masses from them." Sarah was not daunted by the responsibility of caring for one of the country's most important gardens. "There were probably hairy moments but I have forgotten them," she says. "I remember my time in Sissinghurst as being a joyful one. Intellectually it was fascinating to try and get my head around what Vita [Sackville-West] was trying to do."

When, in 2004, Sarah and Jim decided to retire they returned to the landscape of Sarah's childhood around the village of Hadleigh in Suffolk. "Jim was worried I might get bored but I have never been bored in my life," she says. She had been intrigued when she first worked at Sissinghurst to discover an iris called 'Benton Nigel' that she learned had been bred by the artist Cedric Morris and given by him to Vita Sackville-West.

"I knew that Cedric Morris had lived in Hadleigh, because as a child I had visited his garden, Benton End. Pam and Sibylle let me have a piece of the iris for my mother's garden because I felt it should be back in the area where it was bred. When I left Sissinghurst and started making my own garden there were four of Cedric's irises available commercially and I wondered what could have happened to the rest of them. They are so beautiful, I wanted to find more."

Supported by Jim, Sarah doggedly pursued Cedric's irises (she speaks of the artist as if he were still alive and simply gardening further down the lane). Eventually, she was able to propose to Suffolk nurseryman David Howard that he grow the plants commercially. "There is no point in having a collection, unless you share it," says Sarah. Together they presented the collection at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2015, winning a gold medal and enchanting visitors with the elegance of the irises.

Sarah is now looking for the lost irises of other British breeders and starting to focus on her own garden. "I get happier and happier as life goes on," she enthuses. "I loved gardening on that very first day I started and I've loved it ever since. From that moment on I have had a wonderful life being a gardener." □

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