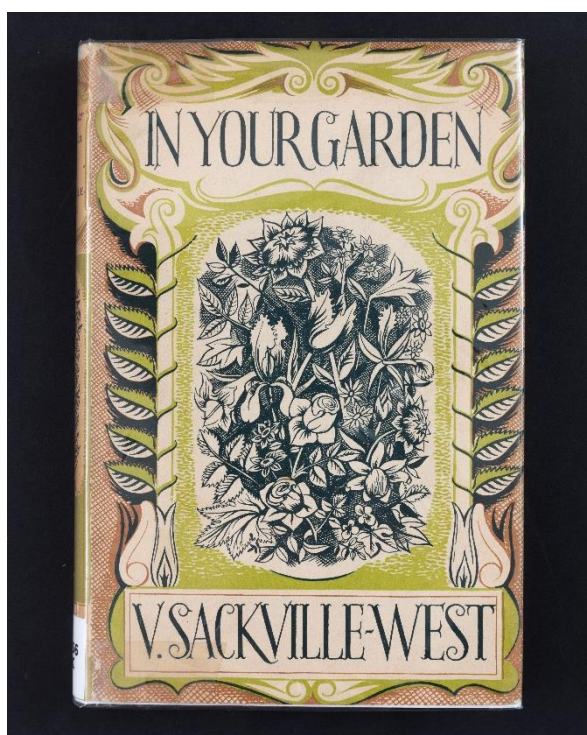


33. *In Your Garden*

In this response, the award-winning writer and producer JC Niala shares her own personal thoughts about a 1951 gardening text. JC explores the book from her own perspective as a keen gardener and author, examining Vita Sackville-West—another gardener and writer—and digging more deeply into stories both national and global that underpinned the appeal of this mid-century volume.

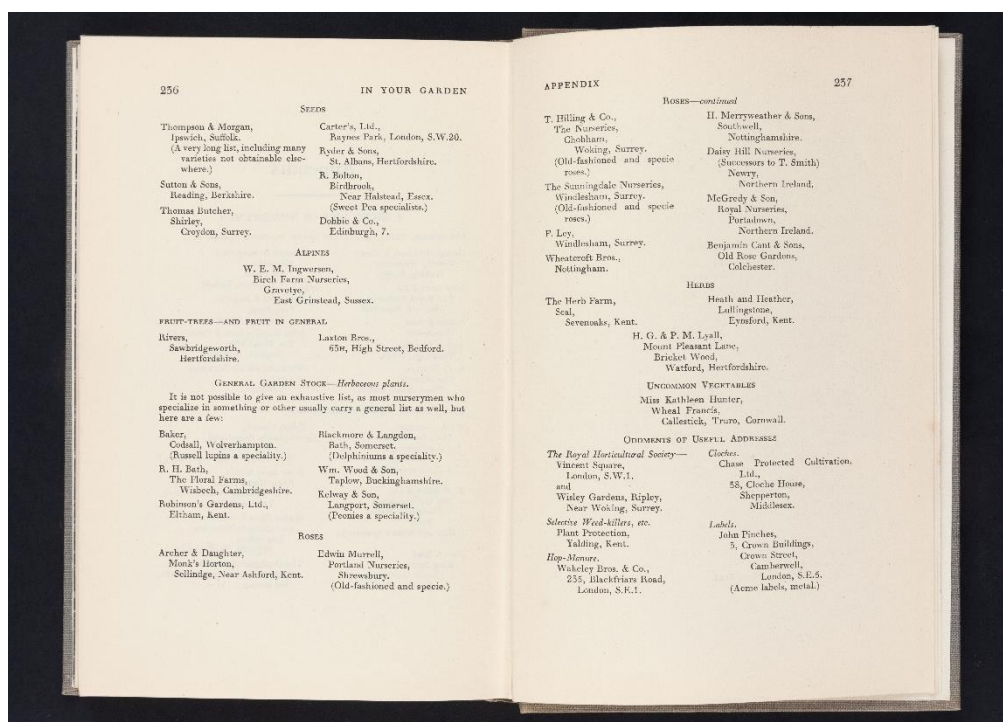
Vita Sackville West, *In Your Garden* (London: Michael Joseph, 1951)



The enticingly floral and decorative cover of Sackville-West's *In Your Garden* (MERL Library 4756-SAC).

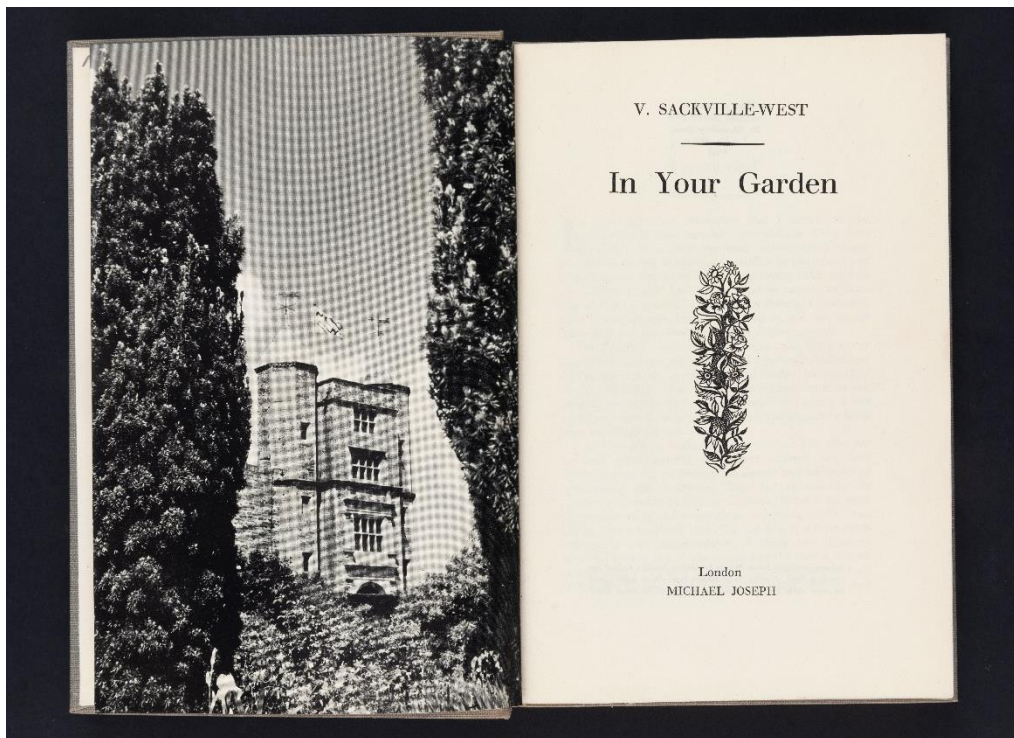
The garden historian Margaret Willes has noted how gardening is an activity that can be attributed to what it is to be English. While other cultures around the world have communal song and dance (I have not forgotten Morris Dancers), England despite being a nation of enthusiasts, are peoples who differ widely in their enthusiasms. Gardening (and its close companion the weather) sit in a narrow band of topics that are safe to discuss with any English person and are always likely to elicit a response. More than that, talking about gardening allows for the expression of emotions that might otherwise be rendered awkward. In one of her gardening columns (from 2 July 1950) (which go on to form the book *In Your Garden*) Sackville-West remarks on how her garden brings her both pleasure and 'despair'. Indeed, there is a wide range of feeling expressed throughout the book. Her columns as such have the effect of catching up with a friend. Part gardening tips, part lush description and part confessional about her own experience of designing her garden, her intimate voice (particularly when asking for advice herself) makes you want to reach for a cup of tea as you drink in her words.

There is something bold in not just paying attention to the everyday, but then going on to share these reflections with a wider audience, and indeed subtly instructing them on how your practice will change their lives. By opening my thoughts on *In Your Garden* like this, I am consciously contradicting the ‘reluctance’ with which Sackville-West approached the book. She felt it was one thing to write a weekly gardening column for *The Observer*, quite another to collate these columns into a book for publication. She herself noted that the column did not always come out weekly—there were also longer gaps between her columns appearing ‘according to the space available’ in the paper. It is this idea of having the space and time to engage with gardening, both as an activity and as something that one would take seriously enough to render into print, that is one of the two threads I explore in response to her book.



Lists of plant nurseries, inclusive of their specialisms, appear as an appendix (MERL Library 4756-SAC).

Much like cultivating in the garden, her individual columns although short, bend and manipulate time. Instruction that is given in a few lines might take hours to execute. Sourcing one of the plants that she recommends (complete with names and addresses of requisite nurserymen) will require planning and effort—this all echoes the practice of gardening. One of her concerns was that the book would be too repetitive, but this is the very reason many of us garden (myself included). Carrying out the same actions every year (with slight variations here and there with the hope of better success) is another way to work with time, and in our increasingly disconnected lives take note of and engage with the seasons. The constraints lent by gardening brings out specific forms of creativity or as Sackville-West calls it ‘blooms of the imagination.’ It is somehow comforting to note that a book nearly three quarters of a century old offers enduring solutions to the challenges we still face today. One such example is recognising that ‘many people have limited gardening space’ Sackville-West offers tub gardening for amusement and interest (we call it container gardening today).



The grand scale of Sackville-West's own garden contrasts with a very inclusive text (MERL Library 4756-SAC).

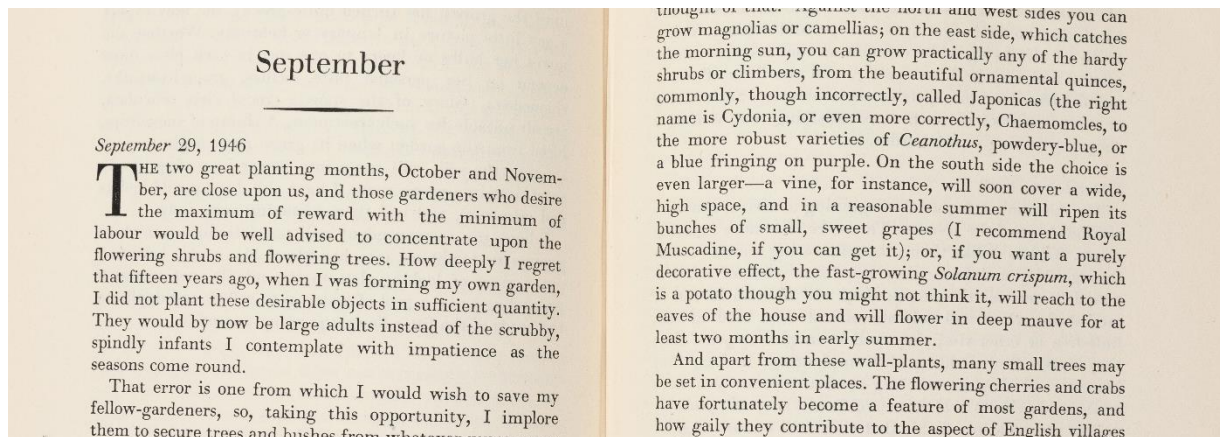
Although Sackville-West describes her book as a collection of her columns on 'practical gardening advice,' the second thread that makes this a gem of a book is how closely gardening practice mirrors life. Sackville-West is like a beloved aunty who dispenses advice with the encouragement that you must still learn to make your own way in the world. Her thoughts on how to approach gardening encapsulate a wider philosophy on life. However, unlike contemporary books that can be on the nose about how specific practices that will change your life for the better, *In Your Garden* does not explicitly set out to do the same. Her entry for the 6th of March 1950 opens:

'Successful gardening is not necessarily a question of wealth. It is a question of love, taste, and knowledge.'

All three are demonstrated throughout the book though in ways that can be surprising. With regards to knowledge – *In Your Garden* could also be read as a history of when different plants from around the world entered England. England's maritime climate means that plants (with the requisite care) can thrive here from many different places across the globe. Sackville-West routinely mentions their places of origin ranging from Algeria to China to South Africa and often with their dates of introduction to the country. She also uses Latin names and gently urges her readers to do so with good humour—reminding them of the international conversations it opens them up to with gardening enthusiasts from, 'Brazil, France or Pakistan.' Reading her text in an era when ideas of the local and global have become overwrought, is a refreshing reminder that even what can be thought of as a parochial activity does in fact connect practitioners all over the world.

Her taste appears in the delight of diversity that thrives in a garden, 'which is sometimes easier of achievement in the vegetable than in the human world.' Although she was specifically referencing colour, her words are a salutary reminder of the flowering (all puns intended) that can occur through

unexpected combinations. Sackville-West directly addresses the reader in a conversational style and draws them into paying attention to the choices that they make with the underpinning that they are coming from a place of love in their interactions with nature.



From everyday words to Latin, her writing invites us to share the joy of gardening (MERL Library 4756-SAC)

Contemporary anthropologists have developed whole areas of study around the ways in which human beings have developed kinship relations with different organisms. Although such work came after Sackville-West’s columns, her book is an example of what can develop when there are profound interactions with humans and plants. She recognises the agency of plants (who she talks about as choosing their pollinators) and wrestles with how unkind it is to slugs and snails to work to eliminate them from the garden. These are deliberations that are still active in the world of gardening today, and undeniably the world in general. Namely, how to create a beautiful life as one decides what to include and what must be excluded. Also, what are the right choices to make in order to achieve the best aims for what it is one is trying to achieve.



In Your Garden continues to inspire, as shown by this under fives garden activity at The MERL.

In laying bare her own failures while passing on nuggets of wisdom from her own gardening experience – Sackville-West’s book is what we would describe today as *permission giving*. She engages in generous correspondence with her readers, also paying attention to their concerns which she uses

as prompts to, ‘challenge [her own] many failures in gardening and make [her] examine [her] own conscience to see where [she has] gone wrong.’ The book is a delightful balance between a sharing of her own reflective practice while reminding others they can do it, if they put their ‘mind to it.’

Further Information:

For information about the book see – [MERL Library 4756-SAC](#)

Further Sources (online):

For more about Vita Sackville-West and heritage see – <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/who-was-vita-sackville-west>

For more information about JC Niala, author of this response, see – <https://www.jcniala.com/>

For more produced by JC Niala in connection with The MERL see – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/news-and-views/2022/02/changing-perspectives-in-the-countryside-jc-niala/>

And – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/explore/online-exhibitions/1918-allotment-oxford/>