American dream

Inspired by Sissinghurst, the owners of Hollister House were determined to make their garden dreams come true.

WORDS PAGE DICKEY PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS
If you cross the stream in Nettleton Hollow and climb the hillside opposite George Schnellkopf’s Hollister House, then turn and look down, you have a view reminiscent of an American folk art picture, painted in oils or stitched on a canvas. It is a New England scene, a gathering of old buildings – the 18th-century farmhouse surrounded by barns and sheds – nestled in a clearing of a lush and wild landscape. To one side you notice a series of formal gardens that perhaps would not have been there 200 years ago.

When George bought the property in the picturesque hills of northwestern Connecticut 35 years ago, no garden existed. What caught his eye was the beauty of the setting and the good proportions of the old house. “I’m in love with the 18th century in America,” George admits, which is not surprising for a man who spent his professional life as a collector and dealer of 18th- and 19th-century furniture and folk art. An interest in gardens was soon ignited, however, when he and his then-partner, artist Ron Johnson, went to visit Gregory Long, director of the New York Botanical Garden, at his country home in upstate New York. They were enchanted by the garden there, with formal axes and framing stone walls, designed by their mutual friend, artist and plantsman Hitch Lyman. Gregory, noting their interest, presented them with a book on Sissinghurst, which prompted a trip to England to see gardens.

“Do you remember, in Julia Child’s memoirs, when she ate her first meal in France and it was as if she’d never eaten before? That’s how I felt about Sissinghurst,” George confesses.

Back from England, George and Ron began plotting an American interpretation of the formal English garden they wanted but knew was too elaborate for their simple rural house. After drawing many plans, they settled on what seems today a fortuitous solution – a series of small walled and hedged garden rooms terraced into the sloping landscape, diagonal to the house so that the clapboard saltbox, painted purple-brown, is merely glimpsed in the background as you walk along the paths.

And yet the presence of the old farmhouse off to the side, remains essential to the character of the garden.

The Gray Garden is the first section you enter south of the farmhouse, a diagonal pattern of brick paths and box-edged beds filled with white (and sometimes blue) flowers and silver foliage, framed by a row of quince trees. Tulipa ‘White Triumphator’ and Paeonia lactiflora ‘Festiva Maxima’ flower above a carpet of Anemonoides. Sea buckthorn Hippophae rhamnoides plays against globe alliums a month later, Lilium speciosum var. album.

From here, you descend granite steps to the heart of the garden, an enclosure with high brick walls and yew hedging. The we
George was keen to enhance this idyllic New England scene with Hollister House nestled into the hillside across the strolling brook.

*Right Taxus × media 'Hicksii', clipped as a hedge, divides the formal/Walled Garden from its backdrop of wild landscape.*
George’s favourite plants

- **Actinidia kolomikta**
  This hardy vine creates a spectacle as its green leaves are chalk white when first open, then flushed pink.

- **Onopordum acanthium**
  The Scottish thistle seeds in the gravel at Hollister House and is an architectural showstopper.

- **Dictamnus albus**
  A handsome vertical in the Gray Garden. “I love the lemony scent when you rub its stems and leaves,” says George.

- **Paeonia lactiflora ‘Festiva Maxima’**
  Fat white double blooms flecked with red. “An old hybrid that is still one of the best,” in George’s opinion.

- **Symphytum x uplandicum**
  ‘Arminster Gold’
  This cornfrey has bold, paddle-shaped basal leaves edged with yellow. “Like a hosta for the sun,” says George. Flowers are a beautiful lavender colour.

- **Magnolia macrophylla subsp. ashei**
  The undersides of the large tropical-looking leaves are greyish blue. The flowers huge, creamy white, and wonderfully fragrant.

- **Rosa Clair Matin (‘Meimont’)**
  A rose from the 1920s with pink flowers that are slightly salmon and so complement a brick wall. Does well in a cold situation and re-blooms come September time.

- **Anemone canadensis**
  A lovely invader, happier in the garden than in the woodland where it is native. George pulls out half of it after it blooms.

- **Euonymus fortunei ‘Silver Queen’**
  “A permanent splash of white and green on the brick wall,” says George.

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**FURTHER INFORMATION**

**ADDRESS:** 294 Nettleton Hollow Road, Washington, Connecticut, USA.

**TEL:** +1 860 868 2200.

**WEBSITE:** [www.hollisterhousegarden.org](http://www.hollisterhousegarden.org)

**OPEN:** The garden is open to the public every Saturday from 27 April to 26 September and to groups by appointment.
Here's the formal parterre of the Gray Garden, framed by quince trees forming a terrace that looks down on to the heart of the garden.

**In brief**

**WHAT** An American interpretation of a classic English garden such as Sissinghurst.

**WHERE** In the Litchfield Hills of northwestern Connecticut, USA.

**SIZE** Six acres of garden in a 25-acre property.

**CLIMATE** Cold winters, hot summers.

**HARDINESS RATING** RHS H7, USDA 5b.

**SOIL** Acid loam.

**POINTS OF INTEREST** In agreement with the Garden Conservancy, the property is owned jointly by George Schoellkopf and Hollister House Garden Inc, a non-profit organisation dedicated to preserving the house and garden.