



GREAT DIXTER • NORTHIAM, U.K.

A COLORFUL HORTICULTURAL HOTBED

The home of gardener and writer Christopher Lloyd, Great Dixter was a test bed and inspiration for his life's work in the garden. Fergus Garrett continues the story of experimentation and education in this ever-evolving garden.

The house at Great Dixter is made up of three buildings—the first was built in the mid-15th century. The second, a yeoman's house from Benenden (across the border in Kent), was built in the early 16th century and moved to Northiam at the suggestion of architect Edwin Lutyens in 1910. Lutyens made extra additions in 1912, which brought Dixter to its current form.

Lutyens was also responsible for the reworking of the garden, and much of his architectural language remains today. Strong structural elements of yew hedging run alongside reworked farm buildings incorporated into the scheme; for example the chicken coop, which has been turned into an open-sided loggia.

All this architecture provides a great framework for the voluptuous planting that spills out at every turn of the garden. Dixter is a garden of contrasts—Lloyd's playful relationship with color saw him abandon conventions of good taste. Here, anything was possible, and clashing colors were positively encouraged. The garden became one of the most written-about spaces of the 20th century, thanks to Lloyd's almost 50 years of writing. During this time he produced 25 books, a weekly column in *Country Life* magazine that lasted for 42 years, and regular contributions to *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. His was a witty voice—sometimes

acerbic, always authoritative—that offered an utterly unique perspective on the garden.

Fergus Garrett joined Lloyd as Head Gardener in 1993; theirs was a relationship that saw the garden evolve further in its unique philosophy. Garrett remains at the helm today, and the garden is managed in much the same way as in Lloyd's time: blending high-impact visual displays with a considered intimacy of combinations. With mixed borders of trees, shrubs, perennials, biennials, annuals, and climbers, the garden is "intensive but allowed to look comfortable," in Garrett's own words.

Wildflower meadows, inspired by William Robinson's gardens at nearby Gravetye, were initiated by Lloyd's mother Daisy, who was also an enthusiastic gardener and trailblazer. The meadows continue to flow into the garden at Dixter, bringing an ethereal sense of nature to the spot.

As a space for learning and nurturing the next generation, Dixter has flourished. In the words of the estate: "[as] one of the most dynamic and complex flower gardens in the world, we have a responsibility to pass on the skills needed to garden this way." Students come from around the world to learn in this setting. Each hopes a little bit of the Dixter magic rubs off on them, and can be transplanted far and wide.