THE TIMES

The best artists' gardens to visit, from Cecil Beaton to Claude Monet

As the Garden Museum in London celebrates Beaton's floral passions, Ann Treneman heads outdoors to visit some of the most lush, evocative spots at home and abroad



Cecil Beaton in his "winter garden" sun room

CECIL BEATON/CONDÉ NAST

Ann Treneman | Monday May 19 2025, 5.00pm, The Times

Cecil Beaton wore many outlandish hats in his time. He was a photographer of high society, including royalty, as well as war. He designed sets and costumes for theatre, ballet and film. He was a writer, illustrator, painter and interior designer. He was decadent, boho, astute, difficult and brilliant.

But can you really see him weeding? Well, welcome to my rose-laden arbour, as he might have said. A new exhibition at the Garden Museum in London is the first to give us Beaton the gardener — in a still stylish straw gardening hat (on display). He's out in the midday sun, if not weeding and planting, then dreaming up extravagant beds of flowers of all sizes and colours, although his favourites were white.

Cecil Beaton's Garden Party captures some of that era's decadent lusciousness, although it is inevitably hamstrung by the impracticality of filling a relatively small space with the endless, huge fresh-flower creations Beaton loved so much. Instead, the designer Luke Edward Hall has festooned the displays with pretty white fabric lilies, which appear here and there throughout, and illustrated the rooms with charming drawings based on Beaton's own.

Note that it's a party, so not strictly speaking about any one garden. As these things go it's rather starry — think Met Gala, but much more flowerful. We meet his decadent crowd of Bright Young Things in the 1920s. Salvador Dalí makes an appearance, sourcing a rabbit masque to be worn with a rose-laden coat (which also featured broken eggshells, of course). There are sumptuous photographs of of Wallis Simpson and the (at the time) new Queen Elizabeth (later the Queen Mother), a tricky series of assignments that must have taken every bit of diplomacy in Beaton to pull off.

"My garden is the greatest joy of my life, after my friends. Both are worth living for," Beaton declared in 1979, a year before his death. We have more garden here than friends, although Roy Strong has written a warm introduction to the catalogue in which he notes: "Hugo Vickers, his distinguished biographer, told me that I was one of the very few people into whom he never plunged a dagger in his diaries." Beaton's tongue was as sharp as a rose thorn: he called Katharine Hepburn, for instance, a "rotten ingrained viper". I'm not sure sending any number of flower arrangements would have made up for that.

But back to the party. Hepburn may not have been invited, but plenty of others were. It was held at Reddish, his house in Broad Chalke, Wiltshire, where he lived from 1947 to his death. Here he created a water garden (with a trout stream and a lake with an island) and a cutting garden with billows of roses, peonies, irises. He gave the house a "flower room" filled with vases and baskets.

His ingenious "winter garden" sun room had a Moorish pond in the shape of a quatrefoil, with cusped edges and a bamboo trellis suspended from the ceiling to support climbers. It had a distinct jungle feel, heavily scented with jasmine.

• This Cecil Beaton exhibition is a floral sensation

The curator, Emma House, has concentrated on showing how plants and flowers were woven into every Beaton design. We also get to meet Bianca Jagger, David Hockney, Penelope Tree and David Bailey. Don't forget Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev. Audrey Hepburn wouldn't have missed it. The final guest is Oscar. You know, the golden man statue. All in all, quite the crowd.
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Six more artists' gardens to visit

Ian Hamilton Finlay, Little Sparta, South Lanarkshire



Ian Hamilton Finlay's garden at Little Sparta

ALAMY

The poet Ian Hamilton Finlay considered his garden at Little Sparta in the Pentland Hills, near Edinburgh, to be his greatest work of art. He and his wife, Sue, moved there in 1966 and over the years, until his death in 2006, worked to create a garden with an extraordinary series of artworks including "poem objects". Finlay, a proponent of "concrete poetry', where word placement and typography are as important as verse, "planted" poems, if not in concrete, then in materials like granite and slate, as well as across streams and in trees. The seven-acre plot, which includes temples and statues, can be seen as a modern philosopher's garden, with themes including revolution, sea and fishing fleets, classic antiquity and the Second World War. But there were more practical issues too. "Life is full of problems," he wrote to the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl in 1967. "Not least the moles, which can RUIN a good garden-poem overnight."
Open Jun to Sep