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The 25 Gardens You Must See

We asked six horticultural experts to debate and ultimately choose the places that've changed the way we look at — and think about — plants.

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16. Little Sparta in Dunsyre, Scotland



Ian Hamilton Finlay's 1983 work "The Present Order Is the Disorder of the Future — Saint Just" at Little Sparta in Dunsyre, Scotland. Charles Hawes/GAP Photos

In 1966, the Scottish poet and artist Ian Hamilton Finlay moved with his wife, Sue, to an isolated farmstead called Stonypath, an hour outside Edinburgh, in the Pentland Hills. With little money or knowledge of garden design, they set about making what would become Finlay's most enduring creative work. The seven-acre garden was originally intended as a place to display Finlay's art: poetry, aphorisms, puns and metaphors carved into stone and wood. His plaques, headstones, sculptures and obelisks — created with a team of craftspeople — explore themes including classical mythology, French revolutionary philosophy, pastoral romanticism and modern warfare. Installed around the garden (in the clearing of a glade, on a bridge over a stream, as plinths in a pond), they're laced with wit and unpredictability: A visitor might be lulled by the peaceful setting, its wide views over wildflower-strewn moorland, only to be jolted by the pair of giant stone hand grenades with metal pins perching on the formal gateposts. Finlay named the garden Little Sparta in the late 1970s, partly as a nod to Edinburgh's reputation as "the Athens of the North" (a reference to its many neoclassical buildings and academic leanings) but also in homage to the militaristic, ancient city-state; he had his own fierce battles with the local council. Almost two decades after his death, the wholly unique landscape continues to resonate in the manner detailed in "Unconnected Sentences on Gardening," his 1980 poem. "Certain gardens are described as retreats," he wrote, "when they are really attacks." — *K.W.*

Richardson: People think of it as an agglomeration of about 150 individual pieces but it was never conceived in that way. It's a total entity. He was mixing the idealism of humankind with its malevolence and violence, so you have things like classical pillars topped with hand grenades and a tortoise sculpture with "panzer leader" ["panzer" is German for "tank"] written on its side. There are a lot of references to the French Revolution because he was obsessed with its mix of idealism and horrifying cruelty, the contradiction in human life. Some say it's the most important work of art made in Scotland in the second half of the 20th century.

Sargeant: I'll second that. And you can still visit it, Tim?

Richardson: It's open and in good shape.