

Walking in beauty

Hidcote's astonishing maze of garden 'rooms' is just as magical today as when it was first opened 75 years ago

Words JOHN-PAUL FLINTOFF

If the previous owner of your garden came to visit, which part of the garden would you show them first? That's what somebody asked Lottie Allen recently. She took a moment to think it over.

Allen is head gardener at Hidcote, in Gloucestershire, one of the National Trust's flagship destinations – and the first to be acquired, in 1948, specifically because of the garden rather than the house. Since then, visitors have drawn inspiration from its ingenious architectural layout – a series of small rooms divided by hedges – as well as the dense, colourful planting, which includes many rare varieties.

Allen is keen to raise the profile of the man who created all this. On the 75th anniversary of its acquisition, the Trust is putting on a series of major exhibitions. "Lots of people have heard of Hidcote, but not of Lawrence Johnston. This was his only garden. If it wasn't for him, this wouldn't exist."

So the first thing she would show Johnston, if he happened to visit, would be something that reflected continuity with his original vision. But with so much variety, what would that be? The old garden? The white garden, maple garden, pillar garden? Gazebos? Red borders? Bathing pool? One of the terraces, stream gardens or wildernesses? The great lawn? The souvenir guide lists 37 separate highlights.

Allen has been a head gardener at the National Trust for 20 years. But coming to Hidcote was a "massive, daunting" prospect. Its sheer complexity required her to write a five-year plan. "It would be so easy to come in and be scattergun," she says.

On my first visit, in March, I walked around the garden before going in, on a path provided for dog-walkers. Keeping tightly to the perimeter, it provides tantalising glimpses of what's inside. Most striking, high above the rest, was a giant *Magnolia campbellii* waving its big pink hands to welcome me inside. Map in hand, I entered the mazy garden and instantly felt a slightly anxious thrill: how could I possibly manage to see it all? And that "fomo" is built into the design quite deliberately.

Johnston was born to a wealthy American family. His parents divorced when he was 12, and his mother brought him to England. He made a career in the army, but was always interested in gardening: three years before buying Hidcote, in 1907, he became a fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society. He was influenced by Thomas Mawson's idea of creating a series of spaces to arouse curiosity, rather than a panorama that can be grasped in one view.

He built out gradually from the house, adding a series of garden rooms. It's easy to imagine that without an initial design for the finished garden, he might have ended up with something boxy and even claustrophobic. But he had studied architecture and ensured that Hidcote includes long, framed views – across its own

extent and out into land beyond. In the lime arbour, Johnston manipulated perspective by gradually reducing the width of the path at the far end, giving an illusion of greater distance. And not for nothing is the elegant wrought-iron gate in the stilt garden, looking towards the Malvern Hills, known as Heaven's Gate.

In the 1920s, Johnston undertook expeditions to South Africa, China, the Swiss Alps, Mount Kilimanjaro and the Appalachians. Within four years of buying Hidcote he was recognised by the RHS for a pink primrose, *Primula pulverulenta*. And over his lifetime he introduced more than 70 plants into cultivation. Several became staples in our gardens: *Hypericum* 'Hidcote', *Lavendula* 'Hidcote' and *Verbena* 'Lawrence Johnston'.

Johnston spent the last years of his life in France. When he approached the Trust to discuss Hidcote's future, he wasn't able to offer an endowment. But the Trust partnered with the RHS to raise funds: "There has been no more beautiful formal garden laid out since the time of the old Palace of Versailles," said the president of the RHS.

'He used smaller numbers of plants, but in profusion'

Allen, having thought it over, says she would take Johnston first to the lilac circle. It reflects both his architectural know-how, and his plantsmanship. "In small spaces, he used smaller numbers of plants, but in profusion. Here, there are lilacs with irises,

and afterwards ceanothus, then lavender."

Of course, not every visitor to the garden cares to know the intricacies of Hidcote. Children float leaves in the bathing pool, lovestruck couples yo-yo up and down the long lawn, while groups of elderly visitors bend backwards to enjoy the magnolia flowers against blue sky.

But many do want to know the facts. They stop to study the guidebook and mutter plant names. These are the people who tend to level questions at Allen and her team of 11 gardeners. A common query is about the hedges that divide the garden rooms and shape the long views.

There's so much hedge, it takes four members of staff four days a week for four months to cut it all. "People are fascinated about how we manage it," says Allen. Two questions come up again and again. "How do we cut the top? And do we use spirit levels?"

The answers, like so much about Hidcote, divide into ideas that most gardeners can only dream of ("We have a mechanical cherry picker") and ideas that we might strive to practise ourselves: "No, it's done by eye." ■

Through the Lens: a Gardener's Photographic Journey, is on at Hidcote until 30 May (nationaltrust.org.uk)



'The most beautiful formal garden laid out since the time of the old Palace of Versailles': the gardens at Hidcote, including an explosion of blooms framing the manor house, the lily pool, red borders and a stunningly situated gazebo

©NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES/JAMES DOBSON