

## In brief

**Name** Coughton Court.

**What** Classic, romantic English garden.

**Where** Warwickshire.

**Size** 18 acres.

**Climate** Frost pocket. The land at the back of the property is sheltered and the front very open to the southwesterly winds.

**Soil** A thin loamy soil with a slightly alkaline pH.

**Hardiness rating** USDA 8.

# Timeless style

Within the walled garden of her ancestral home, Coughton Court, designer Christina Williams has created a series of stunning garden rooms

WORDS TAMSIN WESTHORPE PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

*Achillea filipendulina* 'Gold Plate' adds a splash of yellow to the Cool Border's mix of blues and purples, including *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna', *Thalictrum* 'Elin', *Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple' and the silvery leaves of *Melianthus major*.

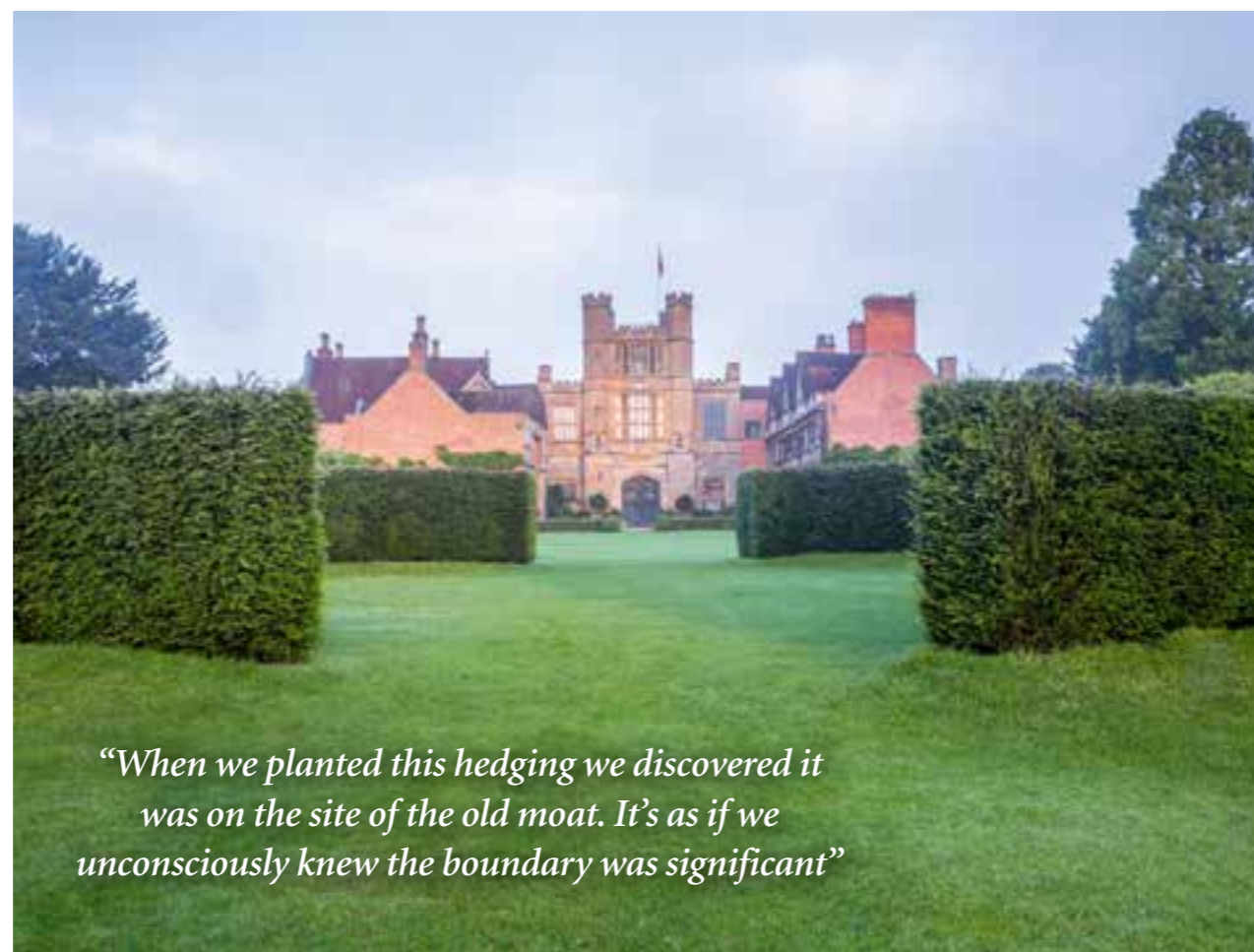


**C**oughton Court oozes history. Home since 1409 to the Throckmorton family – staunch Catholics at a time when that could put you on the wrong side of English history – the house has seen its share of treason and plot. Gunpowder too, in a way, for several plotters gathered here in November 1605 to wait fruitlessly for news of Guy Fawkes’s success.

Today, there’s still drama – and fireworks – aplenty in the gardens, especially in the fiery Hot Border, but their history is relatively new and far less tempestuous. During the Second World War the gardens fell into disrepair and even after the house was gifted to the National Trust in 1946, little was done to revive them. The Throckmorton family, who still live in the house, look after the gardens, and in the early 1990s the current tenant Clare McLaren-Throckmorton and her daughter decided it was time the gardens were shown some love. Luckily, Clare’s daughter, Christina Williams, is a garden designer with plenty of ideas.

She started with the Courtyard next to the house, using a layout based on an Elizabethan knot garden to echo its architecture. From here a formal lawn flanked on both sides by an avenue of pleached limes leads to the Rotunda, a circular lawn, enclosed by yew hedging. “When we planted this hedging we discovered it was on the site of the old moat,” says Christina. “It’s as if we unconsciously knew this boundary was significant.”

Planting the yew brought home the challenges of gardening on a Grade I-listed property. “We are not allowed to dig deeper than 15cm without permission, as there’s a



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**Clockwise from top left**

**The Rotunda, built on the site of an old moat,** is a circular lawn enclosed by yew hedging, which had to be raised on to mounds to comply with English Heritage regulations.

**Christina prizes *Dahlia* ‘Bishop of Llandaff’** as much for its dark foliage as for its bright-red flowers, which set the zingy tone to this red and orange Hot Border.

**Before Christina redesigned the walled garden,** this area of the Rose Labyrinth was dominated by run down glasshouses. In the background is St Peter’s, one of two churches on the estate.

**On each side of the Rotunda** a lime avenue leads to a round, sunken garden. In this one the dominant colour, set by the airy grass *Stipa gigantea*, is gold in the other the colour palette is based around silver.



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▷ possibility that archaeology could be disturbed,” Christina explains. To comply she had to create mounds below the hedges to allow the yew room to root.

However, it’s in the Walled Garden where Christina’s flair as a designer is most on display. The large L-shaped garden is now divided into a series of garden rooms, each with its own character. At one end is the Hot and Cool Garden with its pair of 5m-deep herbaceous borders. “I wanted to create old-fashioned Edwardian-style borders, which were very out of fashion at the time, but I felt they would fit here. Having seen the hot and cool borders created by Penelope Hobhouse at Tintinhull, I was inspired.”

On one side Christina’s Cool Border is a glorious mix of purples and blues – *Aconitum* ‘Stainless Steel’ with its spires of Wedgwood blue flowers, light and airy *Thalictrum* ‘Elin’ and the metallic *Melianthus major* – with spots of yellows. “When planting a cool colour scheme, it is important to use recessive purple-blues and greys, but then use a shot of white or yellow to stop it being boring,” says Christina. “White flowers should be used with grey or green foliage, not both.”

The Hot Border on the other side is full of zingy reds – *Lychnis chalconica*, *Hemerocallis* ‘Stafford’ and ‘Bonanza’, and *Lobelia cardinalis* ‘Bee’s Flame’ – joined in high summer by cannas and the orange-flowering annual tithonia. Christina finds these oranges and reds much easier to work with than dominant yellows, which she says should never take up more than a third of a border.

From the ebullience of the Hot and Cool Garden you pass through the relative calm of the Pool, Early Summer and Lavender gardens to the Ladies’ Garden, the newest garden room, where euphorbias and salvias mingle happily. Turn a corner and you find another of the garden’s jewels: the Rose Labyrinth. A gift from Christina to her



In the Rose Labyrinth, the pink-and-white-flowered *Rosa gallica* ‘Versicolor’ surrounds a statue of Rosamund Clifford, a distant relative of the Throckmortons who gives the rose its common name of *Rosa mundi*.

### Combining perennials and roses

Christina loves partnering roses with perennial spires. Here the purple spires of *Salvia x superba* combine with the red *Scabiosa atropurpurea* and the delicate flowers of *Astrantia major* ‘Claret’ and A. ‘Roma’ in shades of pink that reflect the stripes of *Rosa gallica* ‘Versicolor’. Other successful partnerships are the white-spined *Chamaenerion angustifolium* ‘Album’ with the pink *R. Gertrude Jekyll* (= ‘Ausbord’) and rich-purple *R. ‘William Lobb*’, or the cream and yellow-flowered

*R. ‘Golden Wings*’ with *Nepeta govaniana*, *Iris* ‘Dreaming Yellow’ and *Centranthus ruber* ‘Albus’. She also likes to pair the white spires and maroon foliage of *Penstemon digitalis* ‘Husker Red’ with rose foliage.

Foxgloves of all kinds are welcome in the rose garden. *Digitalis purpurea* ‘Sutton’s Apricot’ dances with white roses with style, while the white and purple *D. purpurea* ‘Pam’s Choice’, works well with dark-red roses, such

as ‘Tuscany Superb’, ‘Madame Isaac Péreire’ or the striped ‘Ferdinand Pichard’. Christina also partners the small and slender, yellow-flowered *D. lutea* with yellow and white roses, such as Wollerton Old Hall (= ‘Ausblanket’) or ‘Boule de Neige’.

Grey foliage is a winner with all roses. Christina mainly uses the silvery *Santolina pinnata* subsp. *neapolitana* ‘Edward Bowles’, *Artemisia ludoviciana* ‘Valerie Finnis’ and *Stachys byzantina*.



**Clockwise from top left**

The elegant formal lawn is lined by two avenues of pleached lime, which were planted in 1992.

The scented Lavender Garden leads through the Early Summer and Pool Gardens to the Hot and Cool Garden with its herbaceous borders. Hornbeam and yew hedges hide the colourful display just ahead.

Paths in the Rose Labyrinth are also lined with a mix of perennials, including *Alchemilla mollis*, *Phlomis russeliana* and the pretty *Lilium regale*.

▷ rose-loving mother, its winding paths snake around more than 250 different roses – shrubs, climbers, ramblers – all cleverly interplanted with perennials. On sunny days, their perfumes are trapped within the walls.

Beyond the walls lies the Orchard, Christina's favourite part of the garden, where several traditional varieties of apple and pear grow alongside cherries, plums, quinces and medlars, along with a productive vegetable garden, and a Bog Garden with native marsh plants and some exotic treasures.

Although new in gardening terms, this is a garden with real maturity and feeling of belonging that only adds to Coughton's sense of history. It's also a garden that continues to evolve. "You can't be too slavish to the original concept," says Christina. "I won't be able to garden from the grave. A garden is a moment in time, so it has to change." □

**USEFUL INFORMATION**

**Address** Coughton Court, Coughton Alcester, Warwickshire B49 5JA.

**Tel** 01789 400004.

**Web** [nationaltrust.org.uk/coughton-court](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/coughton-court)

**Open** See website for details.

**GARDEN PLAN**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1 House                                | 13 Early Summer Garden                                 |
| 2 Courtyard                            | 14 Pool Garden   |
| 3 Formal lawn                          | 15 Cool Border   |
| 4 Lime avenues                         | 16 Hot Border  |
| 5 Sunken gardens                       | 17 Orchard   |
| 6 Rotunda                              | 18 Soft fruit garden                                   |
| 7 St Peter's, Church of England church | 19 Vegetable garden                                    |
| 8 Rose Labyrinth                       | 20 Small orchard                                       |
| 9 Westminster Pool                     | 21 St Peter, Paul and Elizabeth, Roman Catholic church |
| 10 Gentleman's Walk                    | 22 Bog Garden  |
| 11 Ladies' Garden                      |  |
| 12 Lavender Garden                     |  |



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GARDEN PLAN BY HANNAH NICVIGAR