



Sarah Raven with alliums picked in the oast garden, inset. Below: a view of the Sussex Weald

## TIME AND SPACE THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

# SARAH RAVEN

## The gardening guru on hedges, Vita, and investing in a bolthole in Deptford

**P**erch Hill Farm, the home I share with my husband, the writer Adam Nicolson, in East Sussex, was a ramshackle ex-dairy farm when we moved here from London in 1994. What attracted us was its location. It's a hidden, secret place – and we're quite private people. We were also seduced by the amazing views because we're almost at the highest point in the Sussex Weald.

### How would you describe your home?

The original 1590s farmhouse is essentially a two-up, two-down, to which the previous owners had added a rather nasty 1980s extension. There was a cow byre attached and we've converted an oast house into my husband's work room.

Five years ago we had enough savings to do up the whole thing. We restored the farmhouse, ripping out stud walls, and gutted the extension, changing the pitch of the roof to make it fit better with the rest of the buildings. Everything was slipping so we had to dig deep foundations. Since then the walls have cracked again because we're on ground that shifts all the time.

### Who makes the furnishing and decorating decisions?

If anything, Adam does, but I respect and admire his aesthetic. He's good at arranging spaces; I'm good at filling them. He is very influenced by Sissinghurst in Kent, where he spent a lot of time as a child [Nicolson is the grandson of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson]. Everything has a patina. Some would say it's quite shabby. Family pieces jostle with

contemporary paintings. We've painted the walls in earthy, organic shades from Atelier Ellis.

### How would you describe your garden?

I like strong "Venetian" colours and abundant planting. Like most farmhouse gardens, it's divided into areas with different purposes. They're mainly designed to inform the catalogue I produce for my mail-order plant business.

### What changes have you made to your land?

We've converted it into an organic 90-acre farm. The fields have been reduced to a third of their original size and we've planted hedges on old lines. We moved the farm buildings away from the house. We've tried to encourage wildflowers in the meadows but it has been difficult because we have heavy clay soil. We've also introduced our own herd of Sussex cattle and a flock of Romney-cross sheep.



### Why did you temporarily move to Sissinghurst in 2004?

It's now owned by the National Trust, but Adam, as a member of the Nicolson family, has the right to live in one bit of it for ever. Unless you exercise that right I imagine they'll take it away, so we felt duty bound to give it a go. We stayed for nine years, but if you live in a place that is being curated, it's very disempowering.

### Where did you grow up?

My father was a Cambridge don and we lived in a Queen Anne house outside the city. My parents were keen gardeners so I was brought up with that being very much part of life. My mother had inherited a farm on the west coast of Scotland so we spent our summer holidays there.

### Do you have a second home?

We've recently bought an early Victorian terraced house on the Deptford/Lewisham border. I was longing for city life, particularly since our children are all there.

### Where else in the world would you love to live?

We have a plot of land in the mountains in Crete because we love the botanising, the food and the climate. We were going to build a house there but lockdown has put a stop to that for the time being.

### Interview by Angela Wintle

Sarah Raven's new podcast, *Grow, Cook, Eat, Arrange*, is available now. Her new book is *A Year Full of Flowers: Gardening For All Seasons* (Bloomsbury, £25); sarahraven.com

## HOME HELP

### I HAVE LOST THE DEEDS TO MY HOUSE

During a brutal legal case regarding

our land, one of the lawyers involved was given our house deeds by our usual solicitor. As the case progressed we had to sack (due to gross incompetence) the lawyer who had our deeds and move to a new one. At the end of the case we requested the return of our deeds from the sacked solicitor, only to be told that they cannot find them and the deeds are now "lost". Our solicitor advises that there is nothing we can do. Can you help? The deeds are precious to us because they hold a lot of past information about agreements with adjoining landowners. CT, via email

**A**The loss of any documents by lawyers is very frustrating. There are limited avenues for you to explore, but you could start by asking all the parties involved in your case who may have had contact with the deeds to review their files and offices (or in the past year their homes as well) and also ask whether a court somehow ended up with the deeds.

If the deeds cannot be located, you (or your solicitor) should ask the Land Registry to locate the documents that will enable it to reconstruct the Title (that is legal ownership) to the property. There will be a fee and you should seek that from the lawyer who lost the deeds (they should be insured).

There may be a problem if your land has not been sold or mortgaged and is unregistered

– in some cases the original deeds are the only proof of ownership. You have to get the deeds reconstructed or you may experience huge difficulties when you come to sell or mortgage your land.

If you are trying to sell or mortgage without your deeds (or have any legal issues with your neighbours), ask your solicitor to find a conveyancer that is experienced in deed/title reconstruction work. Depending on the size of the land and the complexity of the issues, the fees could run to well over £1,000; the lawyer who lost your deeds should cover costs for work related to their negligence.

If the lawyer refuses to pay, you will need to make a complaint to their regulatory body and then, probably, the Legal Services Ombudsman. The latter will seek to resolve matters between parties informally. Where that cannot be done, and a formal investigation has found fault with the lawyer, the ombudsman can get the lawyer to pay you compensation and to ensure that any error or omission is put right (and to pay for it).

Matt Bosworth, partner, Russell Cooke, russell-cooke.co.uk

● In response to our expert's advice last week on cleaning a crusty oven door, a reader has brought it to our attention that the official advice from Oven Pride is to not use its product on glass as it can cause cracks. We put this to Lynsey Crombie, who stands by her advice and says she has been using Oven Pride on glass for years without a problem.

Send questions to [homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk). Advice is given without responsibility

## READERS' CLINIC

### HOW CAN I STORE AND ORGANISE ALL MY PLASTIC BAGS? THEY ARE TAKING OVER

#### Andrea Mullins

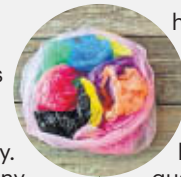
We keep plastic bags in decorative tins that once held bottles of malt whisky. It is amazing how many can be pushed down inside. (I also use one such tin to store spaghetti).

#### Jean Cook, Forfar, Angus

Ocado has a blog that shows how to fold bags in the shape of samosas. They are then easy to store.

#### Tracey Yardley

Fold bags into thirds longways. Roll tightly, place into one used as container, lay it on ground, trample it, then hang this flattened container bag from a coat-



hanger near front door to "grab one and go".

#### Helen Pickersgill

Fold lengthways into half, then again into quarters. Bring bottom half to the top. Make two or three further folds. Store upright in basket or car boot.

#### Victoria Nicholson

Take them to local food bank. They need them.

#### Kate Clayden

#### FUTURE QUESTION

How often should I water my kitchen basil plant to keep it alive? It always dies.

Send tips to [homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk). Advice given without responsibility