

GARDEN-THEMED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Last Garden in England

By Julia Kelly

Longwood Gardens Community Read, March-May 2024

The Longwood Gardens Community Read is a program designed to encourage reading for pleasure and start a conversation. Focusing on literature about gardens, plants, and the natural world, we feature an exceptional book annually (paired with a similarly themed younger readers' book) through a variety of programs, discussions, and lectures across all community partner organizations. For more information about the Community Read, go to www.longwoodgardens.org/community-read.

For our Community Readers we hope these additional garden-themed discussion questions help to spark your thinking and ignite a conversation.

CONTENTS

Why <i>The Last Garden in England</i> was Selected.....	2
Discussion Questions.....	3



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Why *The Last Garden in England* was Selected for the Longwood Gardens Community Read

Hello Community Readers,

When we were thinking about a selection for the 2024 Longwood Gardens Community Read, we were inspired by [Longwood Reimagined / A New Garden Experience](#), which includes a stunning new conservatory, beautiful new indoor and outdoor gardens, and preservation of a historic garden by acclaimed Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, among other features. This project, opening in 2024, was borne out of love for gardens and all that their beauty inspires, and as a continuation what our visionary founder Pierre S. du Pont achieved beginning in 1906.

The Last Garden in England by Julia Kelly exemplifies the meaning that we can find in gardens. Just as Longwood Gardens has brought beauty to the lives of generations, so too does Highbury House—whose lovely gardens are at the center of this historical fiction spanning three generations. Taking place in 1907, 1944, and present day, this novel connects five women—from the gardens’ original designer through to the modern-day designer charged with restoring their beauty—all of whom find true meaning and solace in the gardens.

Author Julia Kelly took inspiration for the book from a visit to Upton House in Warwickshire, England. Upton’s gardens were designed by Kitty Lloyd Jones, hired by wealthy homeowners to “lend a sense of good taste” to their grand homes’ gardens. Lloyd Jones and famous British garden designer Gertrude Jekyll gave inspiration to the character of Venetia Smith, hired to design Highbury’s garden in the novel. Venetia visits the real-life Hidcote Manor in the novel, whose garden rooms designed by owner Lawrence Johnston inspired Kelly to create garden rooms at Highbury House.

We’ve provided a [PowerPoint presentation](#) and [presentation notes](#) to give some background to *The Last Garden in England* that we hope you will share with your readers during your programs. It’s all about Kitty Lloyd Jones, Gertrude Jekyll, and Hidcote Manor and Gardens. We’ve also included [a list of recommended resources](#) about Hidcote Manor and Gertrude Jekyll—as well as the inspiring work of some other female garden designers. We hope you will enjoy publisher Simon and Schuster’s terrific [discussion guide](#). We’ve included a link to that guide in the toolkit but have also included a few of our own garden-themed questions below that we hope will spark additional discussion.

We truly hope that you enjoy this book as much as we do. Please reach out and share your thoughts! Email library@longwoodgardens.org, or post on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram using **#CommunityRead**. Tell a friend or colleague about the book. Think about planning an event or book discussion. We hope you will visit Longwood Reimagined when it debuts in fall 2024!

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Read. Think. Engage.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On page 125 of *The Last Garden in England*, Venetia visits Hidcote Manor's gardens and discusses their creation with owner Lawrence Johnston:

"It is quite the change from before. Hidcote had a small garden, but what you see was mostly field," said Mr. Johnston as we began to walk back in the direction of the house. "One day, I hope this area will be a wilderness of sorts. All carefully planned, of course," he added with a smile.

"Creating a fantasy of nature is part of the gardener's role," I said.

- a. What do you think Venetia means by "creating a fantasy of nature?" Would we agree today that it's the gardener's role to do this?
2. What gardens or other natural places have you visited that have given you solace or brought you joy? What is it about them that causes these reactions?
 3. On page 18 of *The Last Garden in England*, garden designer Venetia states that "Each new garden is like an unread book, its pages brimming with possibility."
 - a. If someone wrote a book about your garden, what would it be called? What would it have on its cover? Who would be its characters?
 4. On page 21, Venetia wonders if the Melcourts want the "comforting familiarity of...strictly manicured, formal spaces," or will they allow her to give them "a lived-in, lush piece of art more vibrant than any painting?"
 - a. Do you think beautiful, ever-changing gardens can be considered works of art? Why or why not?



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