

The frost-covered lawn at Morton Hall glows as the low winter sunlight slants through the canopy of trees.

A Winter's TALE

Frost and snow enhance the dramatic, stage-like setting of Morton Hall Gardens in Worcestershire, with a chorus of box domes and statuary in the wings, and a cathedral-like canopy of trees above

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MIDWINTER FOR MANY GARDENERS is often sufficient excuse to down tools and retreat to the potting shed until the cold weather passes. Not so at Morton Hall in Worcestershire, where Anne Olivieri and her team use the winter months to reshape the gardens and grounds. "October to December is probably when we work the hardest," she explains.

Morton Hall enjoys exhilarating, far-reaching views from its elevated position on the crest of a steep embankment across the Vale of Evesham towards the Welsh Mountains. It also boasts a spectacular, ancient, spring-bulb meadow. Anne and her husband René purchased the 90-acre estate in 2007, attracted not only by this meadow and the astonishing views, but also the elegant manor house.

Below A statue representing the Saxon god of the harvest is picked out by golden light behind a collection of perfect box balls.



Completely recreated between 2008 and 2011 by renowned garden designer Charles Cheshire, who worked closely with Anne, Morton Hall Gardens consist of a series of linked rooms around the house, all offering internal and external vistas that complement the house and surrounding parkland. Essential to the design are angular paths, softened by generously overflowing borders, which, in winter, are dominated by topiarised evergreens and statuary. "Winter adds its own special drama to the garden," says Anne. "The flowers may be gone, but the winter garden becomes a theatre, with the snow like a velvet curtain framing the stage."

Over the darker months, the house becomes the focus, its warmth radiating into the sleeping garden with stark silhouettes and the patchwork of fields beyond. Snow-iced box domes are grouped together, cloud-like, softening the stark outline of the house and anchoring the vista from the parkland. "It's important to have a transition between the areas," Anne points out. "The garden has a lot of sculptural elements, which are picked out in the golden morning light." The house is thought to date from the Jacobean period with a Georgian elevation added in the late 18th century. In the early 19th century, a wing and porticoed entrance were built. Elegance and formality are key here, with neo-classical stone urns standing guard beside the entrance columns. Nearby, a statue of Seatern – the Saxon god of the harvest – presides over a semi-circular yew hedge. This is a rare copy made from the original sculpture, which is part of the group of Saxon deities that resides at Stowe, created by 18th-century Flemish sculptor John Michael Rysbrack.

In the South Garden, another sculpture is crowned by a three-tiered hedge. It originates from a monastery in the North of England and was aptly christened 'Demeter' by Anne's children, after the Greek goddess of grain and fertility of the earth.

The driveway winds towards the main house alongside the parkland meadow, where hundreds of thousands of crocus, fritillary and narcissus bulbs lie, tucked snugly beneath a blanket of snow waiting to herald spring. A post-modern white sandstone monopteros is positioned within the meadow where early morning sun highlights the columns. Designed to be viewed from all

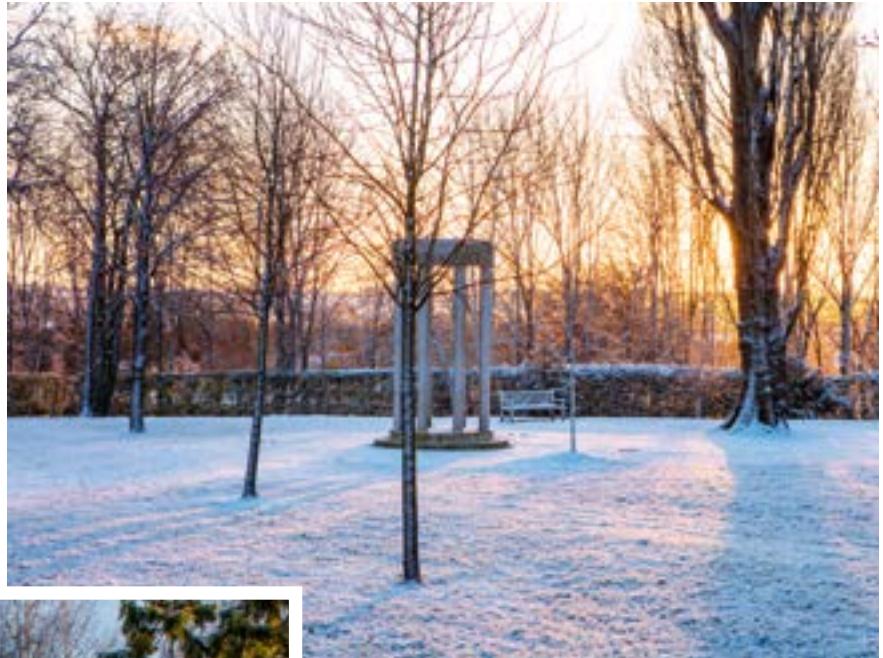


sides, the monopteros was erected in 2014 to a design by Anne's brother-in-law, Berlin-based architect Carl Georg Luetcke. Open to the sky, the structure reflects the airy feel of the gardens.

The meadow leads seamlessly through to the New Garden, separated from the drive by topiarised evergreens, such as holly, elaeagnus and Portuguese laurel. Canopies of silver birch, Japanese cherry, cornus and amelanchiers arch to create a cathedral-like dome above species roses, their ice-laden branches resembling crystal chandeliers; the remaining leaves frozen translucent jewels.

Trees and shrubs take up much of the seasonal work, carried out to a rather unorthodox schedule. "We prune trees in the woods of the estate and the park in September, when the ground is still firm," says Anne. "We then move into the garden where we can work from hard surfaces. Yew hedges are trimmed in November after the borders have been cut back, making them more accessible." All other non-flowering evergreen topiary and hedges are cut

Above Morton Hall's elegant facade. **Far left** Frozen leaves, still cling to *Cornus 'Norman Hadden'*. **Left** Fragrant despite the cold, *Viburnum x bodnantense 'Dawn'*. **Below** The pergola in the south garden with its clipped box 'people'.



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in December and January, which is when their architectural shapes have greatest impact. “Prune them when you want to see them,” Anne advises.

The Stroll Garden is one of Anne’s favourite areas in winter. Stroll gardens are among the classic Japanese garden designs and consist of one or several ponds encircled by a meandering path, with the feature of a bridge

Clockwise from top
Meadows and woodland are visible beyond a line of mature trees; the graceful monopteros; the lower pond with its Japanese tea house; a frosted lemon-yellow flower of *Coronilla valentina* ‘Citrina’.



Clockwise from above

Mature conifers; ferns and birches by the lower pond; archways in the wintry kitchen garden; avenues of viburnum.

or stepping stones across the water. Anne loves the softness of the feathery ferns dusted like icing sugar beside the frozen dark pools, while above,

golden sunlight catches the top of the surrounding birch trees. A Japanese tea house completes the eastern theme, overlooking the two pools with stepping stones that lead to the Rockery, a natural woodland dell, "Like a rocky glacier," says Anne, where grey Kington rocks seem scattered at random down towards the Stroll Garden.

The hard work that is put in by Anne and her team of gardeners, led by Harry Green, during the winter months means that by spring, when the fritillary meadow announces the start of a new gardening year, they can concentrate on planting and preparing for the start of the visitor season. "It's all in the prep, as a decorator once told me," says Anne, smiling broadly. ■

Morton Hall Gardens, Morton Hall Lane, Redditch, Worcestershire B96 6SJ is open by appointment to groups of ten or more from April to September, and for an NGS open day on Saturday 31 August. A three-day tulip festival in collaboration with Bloms Bulbs will be hosted for the first time in 2019 on 4-6 May. The admission fee will be donated to the RSC's Stitch-in-Time campaign. For ticket enquiries, call 01789 272543. mortonhallgardens.co.uk



SEASONAL ADVICE

By head gardener,
Harry Green

● All borders are cut back and weeded from October to December to provide a head start in the spring.

● A layer of mulch is applied just before Christmas, when all the leaves have been cleared and the weather is usually still quite mild. This avoids sealing the cold in the ground and lets subsequent frosts break down the mulch.

● Group 3 clematis and roses are pruned in February. In a very hard winter it may be advisable to postpone clematis pruning until March to avoid frost damage.

● After Christmas, hazel is coppiced in the woods and the branches are brought up in trailer loads. They are used as supports for roses, clematis and tall perennials. The branches are woven into elegant sculptural shapes that lend interest in early spring and then disappear as roses and perennials grow through them. For extra support in the summer, plain iron hoops are an unobtrusive option.