

MAGIC CARPET

Morton Hall Gardens in Worcestershire has a spectacular bulb meadow famed for its fritillaries

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IN BRIEF

Name Morton Hall Gardens.

What Late Georgian house surrounded by modern garden and meadows.

Where Worcestershire.

Size Eight-acre gardens and meadow in a 90-acre estate.

Soil Heavy clay with a high water table and natural springs in the meadow.

Climate 250m above sea level, moderate rainfall.

Hardiness zone USDA 8.

On misty mornings, Morton Hall's fritillary meadow takes on an ethereal beauty, emphasised by the monopteros, designed by owner Anne Luetcke's brother-in-law Carl Georg Luetcke.



AREAS OF THE GARDEN
LIGHT UP AT DIFFERENT TIMES
AS THE SEASONS CHANGE

Mature trees spread across the four-acre parkland meadow, which has its roots in the early 19th century.

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s Anne Luetcke and her husband René Olivieri drove up the driveway to first view Morton Hall, they were met with an arresting sight. “I looked to the right and shouted ‘Stop!’,” says Anne. “There was the beautiful fritillary meadow in full flower. We hadn’t even seen the house at this point, but I said ‘We’re going to buy this house.’” The garden’s three acres of fritillary meadow were doing their best sales pitch. “It was the sheer expanse of it,” says Anne. “I had never seen anything quite like it.”

It is this exquisite spring meadow that has driven and shaped Anne’s redevelopment of the garden. “The meadow is the jewel. The rest of the garden is built around it.” Early on Anne enlisted the help of garden designer Charles Chesshire and their first move was to banish many of the massive laurels that crowded and closed in the gardens and created a claustrophobic feel. Nowadays visitors can take in house and meadow simultaneously as they come up that same driveway, and in fact the whole house and garden has a transparent and airy feel, the house’s many windows opening up on to a garden that slips from one area to the next, with wide views to the parkland beyond in one direction, and across the Vale of Evesham in another.

It was Charles who came up with the idea of the ‘garden journey’. This is a series of seven spaces around the house, which light up in turn as the seasons change, like a spotlight falling on different areas of a stage set. The only places the laurels have been kept is as tunnels that work as transitions ▷

▷ between some of these areas, and you walk from the house through one of these to reach the first of the spring gardens, the New Garden. As with everything at Morton Hall, it was created to complement the meadow. “I wanted to create an earlier spring garden, but it was not to compete with the meadow or to try to be the meadow.” Clumps of snowdrops and primulas start the year here, with flowering cherries, amelanchiers and four cultivars of species tulip taking over a little later. “It is charming and romantic,” says Anne. A meandering broken belt of *Viburnum tinus* divides the New Garden from the meadow in the most delicate and ethereal way, allowing glimpses through to the star of the show.

It is in March and April that the meadow reaches its peak. When Anne first moved in, the display began in March with *Narcissus lobularis*, moving on to fritillaries in April, which here have a high ratio of white to purple flowers, about 40:60. There was also a collection of further narcissus, including lovely *N. poeticus*. “I just watched the meadow for three years. I was in awe of it and didn’t want to harm it,” says Anne. But as she got to know it better she felt emboldened to start tinkering. Over the past six years, she and her gardeners have introduced blue and white crocuses, including ‘Jeanne d’Arc’, ‘Flower Record’, ‘Prins Claus’ and ‘Pickwick’, to pull the season back into February, as well as many more clumps of *N. poeticus* var. *recurvus* and *N. ‘Actaea’* to spring up among the fritillaries. Over the past two years, Anne and head gardener Harry Green have made an even bolder move in extending the meadow’s season later into early summer. After the fritillaries faded, the meadow was just a sea of buttercups for the rest of the year, so they took an idea developed at Highgrove and introduced *Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *suksdorfii*, *Camassia* ‘Blue Heaven’ and *Allium hollandicum* ‘Purple Sensation’. “Conditions seem to be right for them and they are naturalising here. They look wonderful,” says Anne. A monopteros – a columnar structure open to the sky and designed by Anne’s Berlin-based architect brother-in-law Carl Georg Luetcke – provides formal and unchanging contrast to the ethereal and ever-changing display around it.

At the base of the meadow, the level drops down into the first of two woodland spring gardens, a Japanese stroll garden, designed around a watery stepping-stone crossing and a tea house, and planted up with magnolias, camellias, white and blue *Anemone blanda*, and masses of scillas. Via an impressive woodland rockery, it leads to more formal and later-flowering areas of the garden, but revels in spring itself. It was the meadow that brought Anne here, and as well as enhancing and perfecting it, she has created surrounding gardens that manage to flatter and complement but never distract from it. In the process, she has made this spectacle even more magical than it was when she first stumbled across it. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

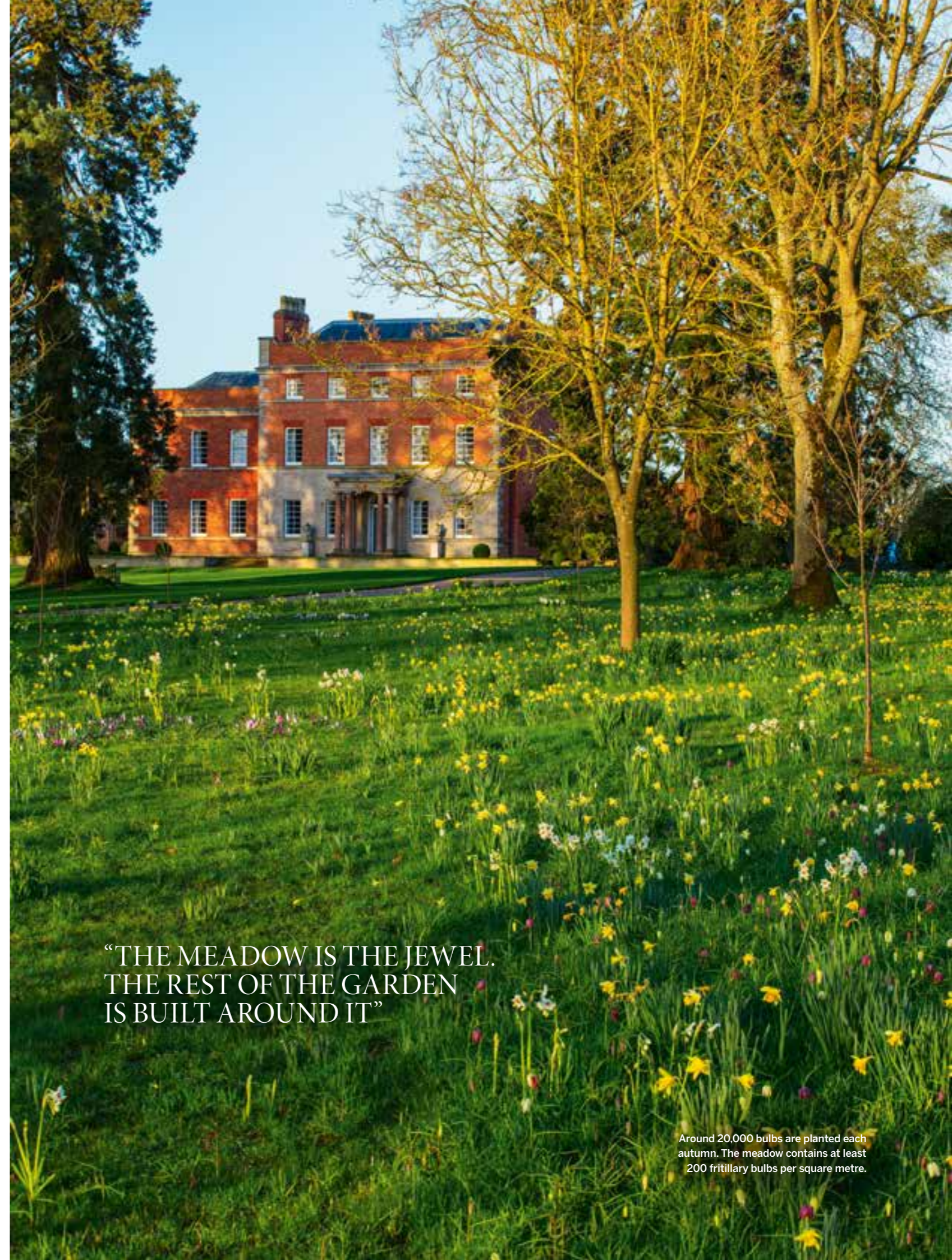
Address Morton Hall Gardens, Morton Hall Lane, Redditch, Worcestershire B96 6SJ. **Tel** 01386 791820.

Website mortonhallgardens.co.uk **Open** For the NGS on 21 April and 1 September, and for the RSC on 30 June and 11 August, 10am-4pm, £7 per adult, children free. The garden is open to groups at other times by appointment. Visit the website for further information.

MANAGING A FRITILLARY MEADOW

The fritillary thrives in the garden’s damp soil, which floods most winters. But Anne has carefully managed and enhanced the area during her time here.

- ~ The fritillaries are allowed to go to seed in late spring, and the meadow is cut in June. The growth is left to lie, so that the seeds disperse, and is then removed as hay.
- ~ A second cut is made at the end of September, and the growth again removed. This helps to keep soil fertility low, allows for easier autumn bulb planting, and also ensures that the grass is short come spring to show off the fritillaries when they are in flower.
- ~ At Morton Hall approximately 20,000 bulbs are planted each year throughout the spring gardens, to improve the show and extend the season.
- ~ Each type of bulb has its own planting method. The fritillaries are planted in clumps of 15 beneath a lifted flap of turf.
- ~ Chilli powder is considered the best squirrel deterrent. Each bulb or clump of bulbs is dusted with the powder once it is in the ground.



“THE MEADOW IS THE JEWEL.
THE REST OF THE GARDEN
IS BUILT AROUND IT”

Around 20,000 bulbs are planted each autumn. The meadow contains at least 200 fritillary bulbs per square metre.