

In the crisp low winter light and with a sprinkling of snow, the underlying structure of the gardens at Morton Hall creates poise and definition

A GALA PERFORMANCE

A sense of drama is always centre stage at Morton Hall Gardens, the historic Georgian home of Anne and René Olivieri





The striking monopteros in the distance was designed by Anne's brother-in-law, Carl Georg Luetcke



“WHAT MAKES THIS GARDEN SO SPECIAL IS THAT IT NEVER LETS ME DOWN. IN WINTER, IT'S CALM AND SCULPTURAL AND IN SUMMER, IT'S FULL OF VIBRANT ENERGY”



IN THE GARDEN WITH...

Owners Anne and René Olivieri and their border collie, Sammy.

House Handsome Georgian house dating from circa 1770.

Features A 10-acre garden and park on very heavy clay soil with a further 80 acres of land. The large meadows and lawns are key to the sense of space and these are fringed by a succession of seven garden rooms, each designed to shine at a different time of the year.

Anne and René Olivieri are avid theatre lovers. Pandemics permitting, they go to every single production at the Royal Shakespeare Company in nearby Stratford-upon-Avon and have been key supporters of the restoration of the costume workshop there, even holding a tulip festival at the Hall to help raise funds.

It's not surprising, then, that the garden of their home at Morton Hall, near Redditch, Worcestershire, should also be laid out with an eye for drama. There's a sense of when to hold back and keep the viewer in suspense or anticipation and when, as with the tulip festival, to go out all out for impact.

The Hall's setting is certainly dramatic. Dating back to circa 1770, the house sits atop a steep embankment and offers astonishing views over the Vale of Evesham to the Welsh mountains beyond. But when Anne and René bought the property in 2007, this panoramic openness had been entirely lost. 'In the interwar period someone had planted an enormous amount of cherry laurel,' says Anne. 'There were metres and metres of it, towering so high that we couldn't see the meadow - one of the main reasons that we bought this place - from the house at all. It felt very claustrophobic and didn't do the house, or the meadow, justice at all.'

The meadow, a three-acre carpet of fritillaries and narcissi in spring, now extended with crocuses and camassia, is indeed worth seeing. Anne, together with garden designer Charles Chesshire, set about removing the laurel and effectively freeing the house from the garden. 'We tried to give the house a breathing space it hadn't had for decades,' says Anne. Charles >



On the East Terrace, a statue of Saxon god Seaxneat stands out dramatically against a backdrop of yew

How to keep TOPIARY AND HEDGES IN TOP CONDITION

Topiary expert James Todman, who cares for Morton Hall's box collection, suggests ways to keep plants healthy and blight-resistant.

- Apply a mulch before Christmas to suppress weeds and protect roots. Subsequent frosts will break down the mulch and incorporate it into the earth.
- Feed regularly throughout the growing season - copper-based Topbuxus is highly recommended.
- Clip box twice a year; at Morton Hall it's done in May and October.
- When clipping, clean your shears in diluted bleach between plants to avoid spreading any disease.
- If you do have infected plants, do not compost the clippings. Fungicide treatments may be applied in spring and autumn.
- Other clipped plants have different regimes. At Morton Hall, the beech hedges are pruned once in August; the hornbeam is clipped twice, in early June and in October; the yew is trimmed in June and November. Flowering shrubs are clipped after flowering.

suggested the idea of the garden as a journey through a series of harmonious spaces and Anne agreed, although she was keen that each area should retain a distinct character. 'I wanted it to be like a promenade performance, where you go from one stage set to the next, but they're linked as part of the same play.'

Closer to the house, the gardens are more formal, gradually becoming looser and more natural as one walks through the rockery, into the Japanese-inspired Stroll Garden and on into the meadow. Each has been designed to shine at a different time of the year and, though none is intended as a specific winter garden, the underlying structure - a strong framework of trees (deciduous and evergreen), clipped topiary and hedges - combines to magnificent effect when the perennials have died back. In the crisp, low winter light these elements come into their own, adding poise, clarity and interest, especially when a sprinkling of snow or frost heightens their definition.

This is no accident of course. 'Any border design, let alone a garden design, should start with planning for what it will look like during the winter,' says Anne. 'We spend a lot of time thinking, not about what is there now, but what will be there in three or four months' time. I always tell visitors that the fourth dimension is the most important in a garden.'

Anne sees the clipped box and trimmed hedges as 'winter sculptures' and they are particularly effective when paired with the stone or wood sculptures that punctuate the grounds. To one side of the East Terrace stands a statue of Seaxneat, a Saxon god, nestled in a semi-circular hedge of yew. To the other is a >



In the South Garden, clipped box leads the way to the statue, named for Demeter, which is beautifully lit for dramatic effect, especially on winter evenings

“We have invested a lot of time into the winter planting, which heralds the New Year”



Drifts of snowdrops between birch trees in the New Garden

ON OUR DOORSTEP...

Visit... The Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon. We're keen theatre goers and we also work closely with the RSC on our Tulip Festival where they mount a display of wonderful costumes in the orangery and among our floral displays, rsc.org.uk.

Go for a meal at... 'Cheal's of Henley, a restaurant in a tiny, half-timbered cottage with an excellent chef serving exquisite haute cuisine, chealsofhenley.co.uk.'

Shop at... 'Hillers in Alcester, Warwickshire, is a farm shop, garden centre and cafe, with its own fishmonger and meat from local Ragley Estate, hillers.co.uk.'

female statue named by the family as Demeter, Greek goddess of the harvest, resplendent against a three-tiered hedge of yew, hornbeam and beech. Visible from the house, both are discreetly lit to heighten their effect on winter nights. Selected trees get the same treatment. 'We had a lighting specialist to figure out what would look good. We found our wellingtonia and chestnut trees didn't really work, but our oaks in the Stroll Garden have the right frame and by lighting them we could create even more beautiful reflections in the pond underneath.'

Even when not lit, it is these trees, like the chestnut planted over 250 years ago, that give the winter landscape here so much of its majesty. Many of the most impressive - including Anne's favourite tree, an elegant, forked Scots pine - are in the Parkland Meadow where a recently planted nut walk now shimmers with golden hazelnut catkins in late January. Indeed, once one's eye has adjusted to the scale, there are countless small delights to be spotted - from the sunlight shining through the peeling, papery bark of the Chinese red birches in the adjacent New Garden to the snowdrops emerging between them and the scent of the daphne wafting on the breeze. 'We've invested a lot of time into winter planting which heralds the New Year,' says Anne. 'Those little signs of life are always so exciting.' Clearly, at Morton Hall, curtain up is as thrilling as the grand finale.

Open April to September for pre-booked groups (minimum 10 people). All are welcome at the Tulip Festival, 30 April to 2 May 2022, and on NGS open day on 27 August 2022. Pre-booking is required, mortonhallgardens.co.uk



Best plants for winter interest

- 1 *Viburnum bodnantense* 'Dawn'; red buds open to pink and white flowers.
- 2 Plant Harvington hybrid hellebores on a raised bank to better see their unusual drooping flowers.
- 3 *Cyclamen coum* thrives under trees where little else will grow.
- 4 Common snowdrop *Galanthus nivalis* is among the first spring flowers.
- 5 The beautiful purple veining of *Crocus* 'Pickwick' makes it stand out.
- 6 Highly scented flowers set the witch hazel *Hamamelis pallida* apart.
- 7 Choose *Daphne bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill' for its fragrant blossom.
- 8 *Cornus mas* produces clusters of yellow flowers on bare stems.

FEATURE NATASHA GOODFELLOW PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS