

COUNTRY LIFE®

EVERY WEEK

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The white-tailed eagles have landed
Why cathedrals need colour, by Simon Jenkins





Sleeping beauty

All looks peaceful at Morton Hall, Worcestershire, but key tasks will be tackled in winter to ensure that, come spring, the garden is ready to burst into life, says **Tiffany Daneff**

Photographs by Clive Nichols

UNDER the unflinching blue of a clear winter sky, the flaws in a garden are soon laid bare. At Morton Hall in Worcestershire, however, the structure sings through the sharp, frosty air. Beneath the meadow, hundreds of thousands of crocus, narcissus and fritillaries are holding themselves in readiness to carpet the grass in early spring, but their absence is barely felt. Instead, the gaze is held between colonies of precision-clipped evergreens that punctuate the transitions between house and garden.

The scene gives the illusion of effortless-ness, but, amid the silent winter air, head gardener Daniel Jones is overseeing a full programme of works that usually begins in autumn with digging holes for 30,000 bulbs. Many are lost to squirrels each year, so they are planted with a hefty dose of chilli powder, which puts off rodents without affecting birds.

It takes the three-strong team 100 hours to clear the leaves from the lawns, paths and beds, creating a heap big enough, as former head gardener Harry Green used to say, to bury a two-bedroom cottage. Before Christmas, the compost produced from last year's harvest of fallen leaves is spread across all the beds.

Not a leaf will be left un-gathered, says Anne Olivieri who, with her husband, René, moved here in 2007. Since then, as well as redesigning the eight acres of garden, they have been wedded to the careful management of the woods and parkland across the 90-acre estate on its prominent sandstone ridge. →

Beneath the frozen Parkland Meadow, thousands of *Crocus tommasinianus* bulbs wait for spring. It takes the garden team 100 hours to gather up all the fallen leaves

The Arden sandstone escarpment offers, on a clear day, views west across to Wales, the Malvern Hills, Abberley Hills and the Clent Hills and looks east towards the Cotswolds. 'In about 1770, when the house was built, you could see the Cotswolds to the east and Wales to the west,' says Mrs Olivieri, who removed the stark allée of pleached limes that marched straight across the West Garden and thus restored the 18th-century views.

‘You can see across the meadow, lovely in winter when snowdrops light the ground’

By 2007, the Edwardian cherry laurels on the drive were almost as thick as they were high, having been planted in double rows in some areas. The effect was typically gloomy. 'You couldn't see the Parkland Meadow from the drive,' says Mrs Olivieri, who had most of the hedges taken out. Now, as you approach the red-brick hall, you can see across the meadow, a view that is surprisingly lovely in winter, when snowdrops light the ground beneath the white birches. These stand in the New Garden, which was made where the old tennis court stood and is loosely separated from the main meadow by a belt of *Viburnum*



tinus. This area is planted with earlier flowering bulbs and are followed by species roses.

Enough of the cherry laurel remains to hide an Edwardian lodge, but some was retained and tunnelled through to create a green door to the meadow. On the other side of the drive, the cherry laurel has been replaced with the smaller-leaved Portuguese laurel, planted shoulder-to-shoulder, but clipped at different heights to give an open and relaxed effect.

The idea is extended to the evergreens to the right of the house, where the much-used

back door leads across the gravel to the meadow. This is an area that is always busy with the comings and goings of family life: cars are parked, the dog is walked—yet all is done against an almost theatrical layered background of clipped laurel, topiary evergreens and a curved green wall of dark yew that provides the backdrop to a statue of the Saxon god Seatern. This was one of only four cast in 1999 from the original Rysbrack statues (about 1727) of the Saxon Deities that stand at Stowe in Buckinghamshire. ➔



Top: Red-brick Morton Hall glows above the frosty ground, with the newly planted *Viburnum tinus* to the right. **Above:** The view to the parkland. **Facing page:** The statue of Seatern, under a mature Wellingtonia, is beautifully set up by the hand-clipped evergreens. This is one of four cast from the original early-18th-century Rysbrack statues of the Saxon Deities at Stowe in Buckinghamshire







Facing page, clockwise from top left: Frost-rimed flowers of *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Forever & Ever Double Pink'; *Polystichum setiferum*, the soft shield fern; one of many hellebores planted between the winter evergreens for early interest; the flowers of *Viburnum tinus* 'Eve Price' are followed by bluish-black berries. Above: *Carpinus japonica*, the Japanese hornbeam, which has fresh green foliage in spring

To Seatern's left, a loose arrangement of stand-alone evergreens, including several hollies, such as *Ilex x aquipernyi* 'Dragon Lady', *I. aquifolium* 'J. C. van Tol', *I. 'Mary Nell'* and *I. 'Nellie R. Stevens'*. These are hand clipped into medium-sized cones, in contrast with the tight-clipped small-leaved box.

‘Behind every decision lies a connection to the overall scheme’

Maintaining the evergreens is a key winter task and the recent work on the buxus by Worcestershire topiarist James Todman has produced a finish that would satisfy the keenest pedant. For now, the discreet labels tucked into the ground between clumps of hellebores are the only clue of the pleasures to come from *Clematis viticella* subsp. *campaniflora*, *C. 'Kaiu'* and *C. viticella* 'Hagelby Pink', as well as *Epimedium grandiflorum* 'Purple Pixie'.

Behind every decision lies a connection to the overall scheme—whether it is in the planting or the colour of the materials—so it is no surprise to find that, together with sculptural evergreens and shrubs, clematis appear in different guises throughout the gardens. In the South Garden—a transition between the formal terrace around the house

The winter garden calendar

Late autumn At the end of the year, leaves are raked and blown into piles, then sucked up by the Terra Vac (a handy machine originally designed for clearing horse droppings from paddocks) and deposited into a huge composting bay. The same is done with all the hedge clippings. Turned four to six times over the course of the year, using a front-loader tractor, the resulting monster heap generates temperatures of up to 60°C and will be ready for use in 10 months

December Once the last leaves have been removed, the previous year's leaf compost (now broken down into a friable mulch) is spread in a 2in-deep layer across

all the beds and borders before the really cold weather sets in and freezes the ground. Mulching now also avoids mulching over emerging spring bulbs

Early January The roses are pruned as soon as possible after Christmas, so as not to damage emerging bulbs. At the same time, hazel rods and willow wands, coppiced from the estate's woodlands, are used to build supports for large shrub roses, clematis and tall perennials. Rose supports are fashioned from hazel uprights, through which twists of willow are woven. These are sturdy enough to last a couple of years. Herbaceous supports are

woven from 'feathered' slender hazel branches and are replaced each year

January Large evergreens are pruned and a cherry picker is used to tackle the massive laurel hedges. The holly, elaeagnus and decorative pears are also pruned now. The individual evergreens are pruned with small hedge cutters

Early February Well-rotted horse manure is spread around the roses

Late February The Group Three clematis in the rose beds are pruned and tied to individual hazel supports. These supports will carry the volume and weight of the clematis and so protect the surrounding roses

and the Kitchen Garden—the winter beds are given structure with plant supports made from hazel and willow coppiced in the woods.

Each bed contains groups of three roses and a clematis, the dessicated tangle of stems being carefully gathered together at the end of summer and then raised above the damp

ground to perch like twiggy nests, providing lofty shelters for overwintering insects. Come late January/early February, the clematis will be pruned together with the roses and, in a final finishing touch, the beds are spread with well-rotted manure in anticipation of the long-awaited spring. 🌸