



Brimming with brilliant ideas

*Morton Hall Gardens,
Worcestershire
The home of Mr and Mrs
René Olivieri*

This ambitious restoration successfully fuses 18th-century landscape ideas with a modern aesthetic, finds **Jacky Hobbs**

Photographs by Clive Nichols

MORTON HALL is perched on top of the Arden sandstone escarpment in Worcestershire, looking out over the Vale of Evesham and across to the dark shadow of the Welsh mountains, framed by the familiar forms of the Malvern and Cleve Hills. It's a fitting prospect for the late-Georgian house that was acquired by René and Anne Olivieri in 2007.

'The views from the hilltop were breathtaking,' recalls Mrs Olivieri, 'and it had an enchanting spring meadow framed by ancient trees.' The latter was not, however, visible from the house because it had been completely enclosed by towering Edwardian laurel hedges, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere. The formal garden areas were rather small and heavily infested with bindweed.

In order to complement the house, which had had an extension added in the early 19th century, any new garden would need to be on a similar scale and would have to deliver real impact. The Olivieris also determined that the design should fuse 18th-century landscape ideas, Arts-and-Crafts >

The primulas, including *Primula pulverulenta*, *P. japonica* Postford White and *P. japonica* Apple Blossom, in the pond are chosen to lend a succession of colour

garden style and postmodern elements. They found the ideal partner in designer and writer Charles Chesshire, 'a great plantsman and creator of powerful landscapes,' says Mrs Olivieri.

Together, they devised a series of garden rooms that leads from bulb-strewn meadows and woodlands to languid formal lawns and sumptuous borders to a productive and ornamental kitchen garden.

A decade on, Mr Chesshire's work has settled in and Mrs Olivieri and head gardener Harry Green delight in refining the plantings and colour schemes, as well as creating new garden features. There are now more than 1,000 varieties of plants at Morton Hall and, although each area of the garden is subtly concealed from the next with gates, tiered plantings and carefully sited sculpture acting as 'palate cleansers', there is a sense of connectivity and harmony created through landscape elements, colour schemes and planting styles.

From the clean-cut, paved expanse of the raised East Terrace, it would seem little has changed since the late 18th century. The bowling-green lawn is pinned at its far edges by vast specimen trees. Giant box balls alleviate the geometry of lawn, paving and grave and topiarised box clouds nestle under the eaves of an ancient listed chestnut, softening the hall's formal façade.

From the East Terrace, a tunnel in an inconspicuous laurel bower leads into Mr Chesshire's New Garden, a grassy glade set with graceful shrub roses. These include *Rosa Nevada*, *R. Alba Maxima* and *R. villosa*

Right: A loose planting of *Paeonia lactiflora* Krinkled White with *Iris Annabel Jane* is offset by neatly clipped box spheres in the Impressionist South Garden underneath a spreading chestnut tree

pomifera, arching beneath a canopy of *Cornus kousa* Norman Hadden and White Fountain, together with a collection of Japanese cherries, amelanchiers and silver birches.

Beyond a seam of *Viburnum tinus*, the parkland meadow gleams with buttercups in early summer. Hundreds of thousands of bulbs lie dormant under the soil waiting to produce months of colour. The meadow year begins with snowdrops, followed by narcissi, anemones, primulas and snake's-head fritillaries.

Work continues to further embroider this magic carpet with new plantings of crocus, camassia and allium. 'It's surprising how few bulbs we upturn or disturb,' says Mrs Olivieri, whose new plantings reach towards a simple white sandstone monopteros.

‘Each area is subtly concealed from the next, yet there is a sense of connectivity and harmony’

There's a thought-through sensitivity in the way such contemporary elements have been introduced. In the woodland gardens, the Japanese Stroll Garden and Rockery look as if they've been here for many years. These were, in fact, created by Mr Chesshire, who has cleverly softened their theatricality. His Japanese garden contains some traditional elements, but sidesteps the typical vocabulary of clipped trees and raked paths that would look out of place in this setting.

From the Japanese tea house, a path wanders through lush ferns and alongside two pools that are connected by a small waterfall. ➤



Left: The Rockery steps, with *Campanula latiloba* Hidcote Amethyst and Highcliffe Variety. Right: The bearded *Iris Dusky Challenger*

Left to right: The feathery, Whistler-esque colours of bearded *Iris Monet's Blue*, *Rosa Old Blush China* and *Clematis Royalty*



The banks are busy with candelabra primulas—an exception to the otherwise restrained colour scheme—and Japanese *ensata* irises, which are mirrored in the water.

The candelabras beside the upper pond flower in succession, beginning with the magenta *Primula pulverulenta*, followed by snowy *P. japonica* Postford White and the pink *P. japonica* Apple Blossom. These, says Mr Green, are in striking contrast to the golden *P. bulleyana* in the lower pool.

None of these primulas hybridise, a deliberate choice to retain purity of colour. Inspired by the dramatic mass planting at Hidcote, swathes of planting rather than individual groups are found throughout the gardens. Any colourful interlopers are systematically removed. Mr Green pulls up errant purple foxgloves, leaving the white digitalis to harmonise with the silver birches and tree peonies.

This tranquil scene hides a strict regimen that includes pond maintenance, rigorous weeding, careful pruning of the interiors and canopies of Japanese acers and the continuous thinning of rampant bamboos to create translucent veils—all of which are essential to maintaining the graceful, weeping architecture of the garden.

Some of the remaining laurels have been sculpted into a lofty dome that opens out

unexpectedly into the lower basin of the woodland Rockery Garden. Here, more than 100 tons of Welsh rock have been placed so they look as if the resulting riverbed of rock, stone and gravel had been laid down millennia ago.

‘In the Kitchen Garden, colours echo the path of the sun. Rose pinks and soft blues rise in the east,’

Like a river, waves of intense-blue *Campanula latiloba* Hidcote Amethyst and Highcliffe Variety sweep over the stones crested by pure white digitalis. The impression of this ancient riverbed is heightened with plantings of large ferns in the banks. ‘Gardening the “river” is challenging,’ agrees Mrs Olivieri. ‘It’s a simultaneous battle with both damp and desiccation.’

Emerging from the shade of the Rockery and through a wisteria-clad oak arbour brings the visitor to three formal gardens close to the house. The South Garden is Impressionist, with sumptuous herbaceous and rose borders and a colour scheme in soft

The richly planted herbaceous border in the Expressionist walled Kitchen Garden

pastels. A gate in an old brick wall opens onto the Expressionist Kitchen Garden, with its hot colour scheme and bold combinations of edibles and ornamentals.

The West Garden is deliberately restrained, with mounded Mediterranean planting softening the back of the house.

In the wide borders of the South Garden, *Iris germanica*, old-fashioned and English roses and herbaceous peonies are effortlessly woven together. There’s *Rosa* Old Blush China and *R. Falstaff*, *Iris* Annabel Jane and Swingtown, as well as *Paeonia* The Nymph and *P. Krinkled White* mixed with clematis, alliums, veronicas and nepetas. Look closely and it becomes apparent that this billowing is created not by Nature, but by a painstaking combination of pruning and training on homemade hazel structures. The hydromechanics of the South Garden fountain are similarly fine-tuned, so the water falls like a beaded veil into the basin below.

In the Kitchen Garden, colours echo the path of the sun. Rose pinks and soft blues rise in the east. The Midday Borders burn with fiery reds, oranges and yellows and, at the western end, colours fade to dusky hues. At the heart of the sun, the central >

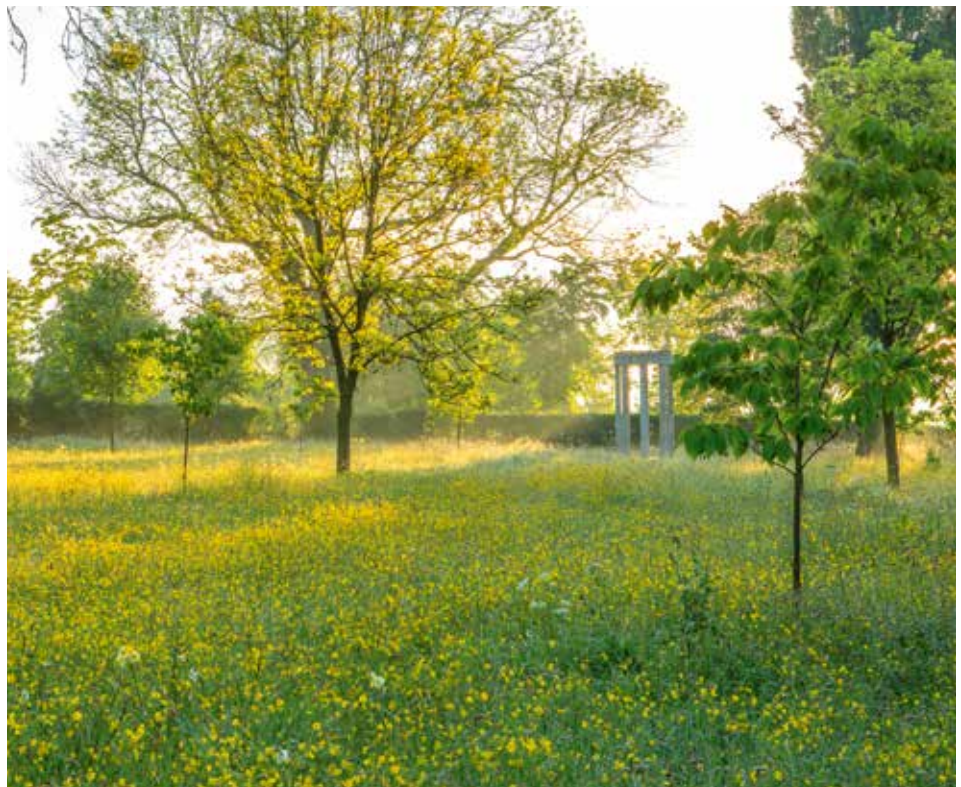


An inspired planting of *Primula bulleyana* with *Digitalis purpurea Alba* and silver birches below the Japanese tea house

parterre is divided into four beds of edible and companion plants connected by wrought-iron arbours that are smothered with roses and *orientalis*-type clematis.

Like scenes in a play, each room has its part to play in creating the whole. The West Garden lies at the back of the house, with its farmhouse-like appearance, in stark contrast to the formal elegance of the main façade. Organically shaped borders, crazy paving and soft aromatic plantings create a Mediterranean-courtyard atmosphere punctuated by tall spikes of German irises including Monet's Blue and Dusky Challenger, from which one can only stand and stare, drawn back to that magnificent view of the Welsh mountains. 🐦

The Morton Hall gardens are open to groups for guided tours followed by lunch or afternoon tea, from April to September, by appointment, as well as to the public for the NGS Open Day on August 31. Proceeds from the non-NGS visits are raising funds for the redevelopment of the RSC's costume department. To book a group visit, telephone 01386 791820 or email morton.garden@mhcom.co.uk. Visit www.mortonhallgardens.co.uk



Hidden beneath the buttercups in the meadow are hundreds of thousands of bulbs, providing months of colour from snowdrops through to narcissi, anemones and fritillaries