

GARDEN ABLAZE WITH POOLS OF COLOUR

Blending seamlessly into the undulating Worcestershire countryside,
the autumn display at Morton Hall is full of fiery beauty

IN THE WEST Garden at Morton Hall in Worcestershire, pale morning sun illuminates the view across the Vale of Evesham, over the double ha-ha towards the gently undulating Malvern and Clee Hills. The dark outline of their Welsh cousins are just visible on the horizon. Sheep nose at frosty grass, and the patchwork of pastureland is outlined by trees carrying russet- and flame-coloured leaves.

It is a majestic sight; one which has been carefully restored and embellished by Anne and René Olivieri, owners and conscientious custodians of this elegant late Georgian house. Set on the crest of the Arden sandstone escarpment, 656ft (200m) above sea level, it has 8 acres of gardens and park in a 90-acre estate. The West Garden borders, featuring masses of russet-red sedums and the last of the deep purple asters, have been shaped to focus the eye on the countryside beyond, with trees selectively felled and the ha-has created to blend the gardens seamlessly with the landscape.

“This is a magical location, with the steep escarpment on both sides of the house and old woodland in the park,” says Anne. “I felt the magic as soon as we saw the house in 2007, and we made an offer to buy it that same day.”

Although the Olivieris could see the potential of their future home, they knew that there was much work to be done. The area to the front of the Hall was dominated by towering walls of dense, overgrown laurel hedging, up to 13ft (3.9m) high, while to the west, the stunning views were obscured by a semi-circle of pleached limes. “We wanted to remove anything that was suffocating the house, and it was

➤ All the colours of autumn erupt in a woodland-style planting of trees and shrubs, including *Acer palmatum* ‘Seiryu’, maples, birches, *Betula nigra* ‘Heritage’ and prunus ‘Shirofugen’.



Illustration: Val Ansfield & Nicky Cooney



Anne and René Olivieri on the steps of their home, Morton Hall.

TWO SIDES OF A HOUSE

Morton Hall was built circa 1770 for lawyer Thomas Perkins, but it was tobacco heir Gilbert Player who later added parkland to the property in 1905. Player, a Quaker and a bachelor in his 30s, had bought the Hall as a holiday home, and he planted many of the mature trees which still stand today. The Hall presents a typically Georgian elegant ‘cube’ at the front of the property, while the back has the more rustic look and feel of a farmhouse. Though the facade looks perfectly symmetrical at first sight, it does have some anomalies. At the time it was built, house facades were sometimes chosen from pre-designed pattern books, then constructed more or less to plan. Anne Olivieri believes that the front door, which is off-centre, and the tall windows with unusual horizontal, rather than more conventional vertical panes, might be evidence that the builders put their own interpretation on the instructions. Either way, the impression given is of a gracious home, with warmth. “It has been described as Queen Anne at the front, Sally Anne at the back,” says Anne.





The columns of the monopteros rise elegantly from the grass glistening with early morning frost. Forming an 'alleyway' to the fore are rows of cherry trees 'Fragrant Cloud', their leaves like burning embers.

essential to create the connection between the building and the landscape,” explains Anne. “Openness, vista and light is very much an 18th century ideal, so our aims were true to the age of the house. However, simply opening it all up would have resulted in a park, rather than a garden, so we needed to incorporate elements of Arts and Crafts design, which introduced the concept of ‘rooms’.”

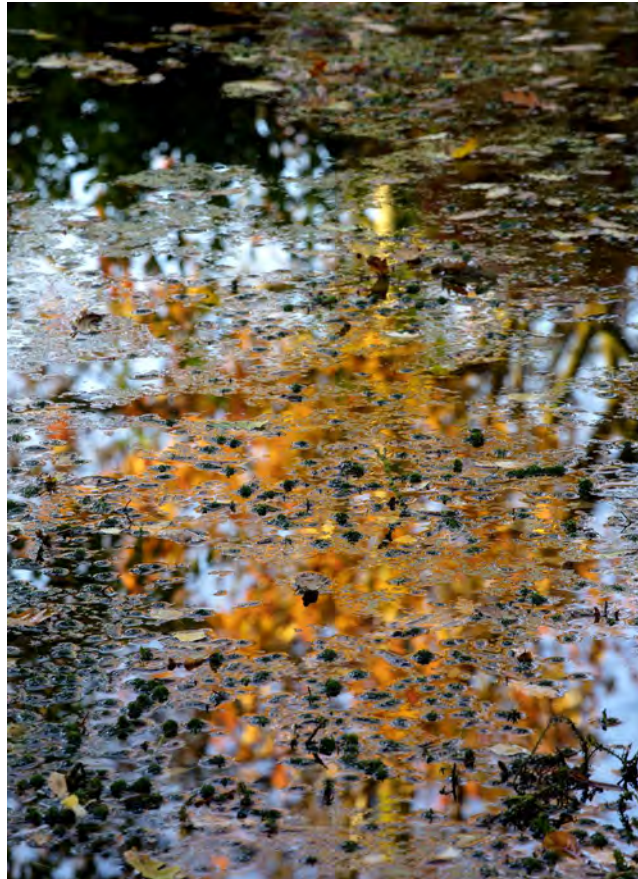
Year-round interest

Working closely with garden and landscape designer Charles Chesshire, the couple have created a circuit of seven interconnecting outdoor areas, placing the house at the centre of the journey. Each area takes a turn to carry the show, so there is something to see every month, and November is no exception. “Charles promised me that I would never have to buy a bunch of flowers again, and apart from approximately six weeks of the year, it works,” says Anne.

From the East Terrace, in front of the main entrance to the Hall, a gravel path leads through a laurel archway into the New Garden and then into the Park Meadow. On an early November morning, the ghostly trunks of silver birches display their confetti of delicate golden leaves. There are flaming maples, and an intense purple-scarlet *Cornus florida*.

A grassy path leads to a sculptural folly. This is a monopteros, a circular colonnade made from pale sandstone, which supports a roof with no walls. The structure is a contemporary interpretation of a classical feature, popular in Georgian gardens. Decorative elements were often included, inspired by the European Grand Tour, which was a pastime ➤





Dappled golden leaves are reflected in the tranquil water of the Stroll Garden's lower pond; a favourite autumn spot for Anne (above). Bushy *Hakonechloa macra*, colourful *Acer palmatum* 'Seiryu', maples and birches surround the water's edge and cloak the exquisite teahouse (right).



popular with wealthy people at the time. This pared-back version was designed by Anne's brother-in-law, architect Carl Georg Luetcke, and its pale vertical lines contrast dramatically with the deep red foliage of an informal alley of 13 young prunus 'Fragrant Cloud.' Mature trees include elegant hornbeam and the flaming red of *Acer rubrum* and *A. saccharinum*. In the east corner of the park, the path turns into a nut walk, mirrored on the west side with a row of witch hazels, or hamamelis.

Making an impression

Crossing the drive, a bark path leads past the vast girth of a sequoia tree, planted in 1905, to the Japanese Stroll Garden,

which shimmers with autumn colours and textures. Stroll gardens are one of four types of classic Japanese garden design. They date back to the 1600s and were usually built by aristocrats for the entertainment of their guests. A stroll garden places the emphasis on the path, which is always positioned to offer exceptional views of the space. Although this one looks as if it has been in place for years, it is part of the landscaping which was completed in 2008. "Our planting is much more informal than the traditional ones, which are very minimalist," says Anne.

The path leads to the lower of two ponds, with a canopy of large oaks, cedars and a majestic wellingtonia, whose foliage is reflected in the tranquil surface of the pools. The

best view of the lower pond can be seen from the porch of an elegant wooden teahouse, which nestles in the surrounding evergreen bamboos and silver birches. "It is so tranquil here at this time of year; very harmonious," says Anne. "It is one of my favourite places to be in winter."

Along the edges of both ponds, paths pass closely by marginal and water plants. Clumps of the ornamental grass *Hakonechloa macra* look like lions' manes, with great orange explosions of colour matched by the fiery foliage of Japanese acers and cherries. A carefully placed bench is sheltered by an umbrella of tricoloured acer 'Seiryu'. From a tiny waterfall between the upper and the lower pond, stepping stones appear to float across the surface of the upper one, past water ➤

"There ought to be gardens for all months in the year, in which, severally, things of beauty may be then in season"

Sir Francis Bacon, *Of Gardens*

lily pads. These steps are made from roughly hewn chunks of grey Welsh Kington stone, which have been attached to brick pillars that extend 5ft (1.5m) below the surface of the water. The pond water is kept clean with a circulation pump, and a barley straw extract is used to absorb unwanted algae. Falling leaves are removed once a week so they do not over-oxygenate the water. There are no fish, as Anne did not want to net the ponds against herons hunting for food.

Woodland rockery

Through an archway and a laurel dome, the path opens to a vast, overscaled woodland rockery, which was created with more than 100 tons of Welsh Kington rock. The giant pieces look as if they have been frozen in motion. “It is glacier-like,” explains Anne. “We’ve tried to keep the planting to emphasise the ancient feel, so there are lots of euphorbias and what I’d describe as structural plants.”

Passing through the South Garden reveals the last of the roses on their hazel supports. Here, there is box, pittosporum and also evergreen shrubs, such as choisyas, which add structure. The path leads through a gate in a charming old brick wall to a productive kitchen garden, where vegetables are growing in four large, rectangular beds. The soil is neutral loam over heavy clay, which requires the addition of grit for good drainage.

Anne has a team of three to ensure that the gardens are immaculately tended, with a full-time head gardener Harry Green, and grounds manager Joe Humphrey, who share an assistant. Anne works with them as often as she can, and one volunteer helps out in winter too. “We have to be very organised: this is such a beautiful garden, we need to do it ➤

CONNECTING THE SPACES

As the garden dies back in November, it provides an opportunity to take stock. “We can see the bones of the garden; see what has worked and what hasn’t,” says Anne. The flow of the space can be appreciated: the same York stone paving is used in different garden ‘rooms,’ for example, to create a sense of connectivity. It is not just the hard landscaping which follows this rule. The colours of the foliage are used to create both similarities and differences. The clouds of reds and oranges recurring in the Stroll Garden add to its sense of harmony, while the pale stone of the monopteros contrasts with the flaming leaves of the acers. At the centre of the gardens, the tawny brick house itself is the tonal heart of this autumnal spectacle.



A perfectly placed bench to rest awhile against the protective might of a large trunk looks out over the crystal-clear surface of the lower pond.

“There yet will be
Warm noons, the honey’d leavings of the year,
Hours of rich musing, ripest
autumn’s core”

Edward Dowden, ‘In The Garden VIII: Later Autumn’



Acer 'Seiryu' and copper-red canopies of *Prunus shirofugen* inject the borders with seasonal warmth.

justice,” says Anne. Though this is her first large project, she grew up in the countryside in Germany, where her mother had a cottage garden, and her father grew roses. “I always loved flowers and colour, and when I was small, I would help to lift the tulips and label them,” she says. “Even while living in Berlin, where I only had a balcony, I grew flowers, and then we moved to Oxford, where I created a townhouse garden. I would love to be able to paint, but I can’t, so perhaps this is what I do instead.”

Maintaining the garden to a high standard takes time, thought and effort. “When I’m with visitors, I can appreciate it: when I’m by myself, I tend to go around with my list,” says Anne. But it is clear that she is still in awe of the beauty which first drew her here. “Wherever you are, you look out at something beautiful. No part of the house and garden is

inferior to another, so you can start the journey wherever you want to,” she explains. “In the winter, we have amazing sunsets in front of the kitchen window. Being up on the escarpment and watching it happen is just unreal.” ■

• Words: Fiona Cumberpatch • Photography: Clive Nichols

CONTACT

Morton Hall Gardens are open from the start of April to the end of September, by appointment only, and for groups of 10 or more, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Profits from the garden tours are donated to the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-Upon-Avon.
www.mortonhallgardens.co.uk