



Before the swallow dares

The early days of spring at Morton Hall in Worcestershire are marked by glorious drifts of bulbs, woodland perennials and early-flowering shrubs, in differing garden areas carefully staged as a journey around the house

Author: Stephen Lacey, garden writer. Photography: Clive Nichols

Spring's hope eternal
Narcissus lobularis drifts through the Parkland Meadow, succeeded by a magic carpet of flowers including snake's head fritillaries. A modern interpretation of a colonnaded Greek monopteros, on a sightline with the house's front door, is the architectural eyecatcher.



Flower-spangled vistas

The front of the Georgian house looks out onto grass, flushed with bulbs. The garden surrounds Morton Hall, and the two talk to each other through carefully planned vistas.

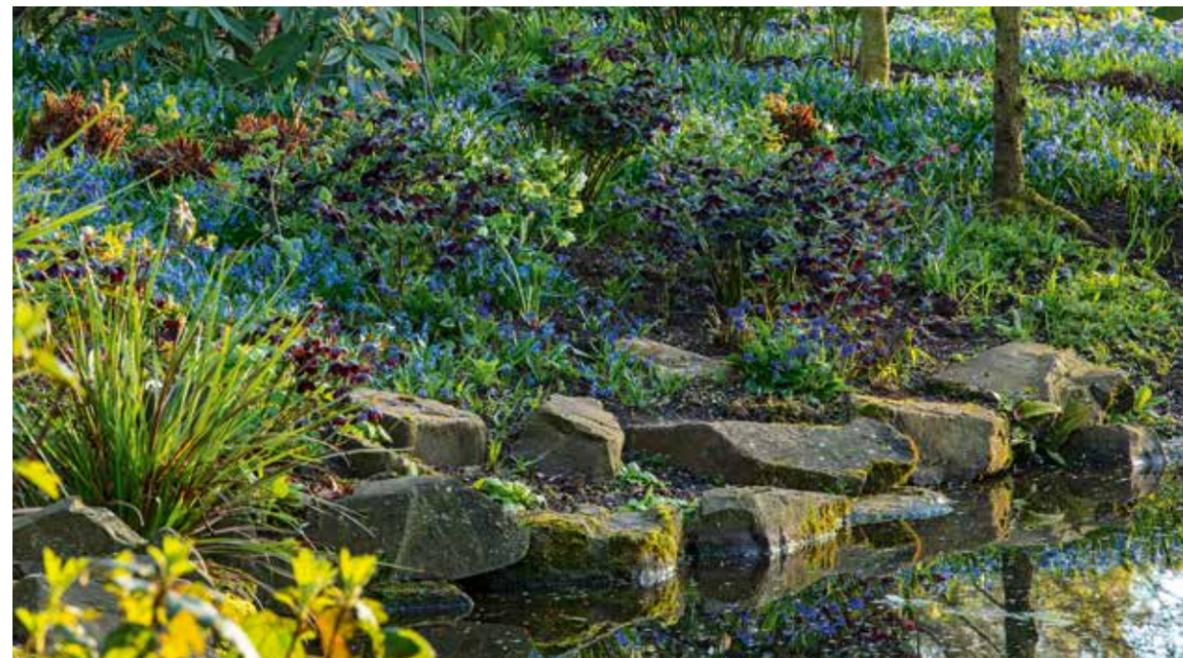
Underplanting with a theme

Narcissus 'Thalia' complements white birch trunks in the Japanese-inspired Stroll Garden, which descends a slope below the tea house, designed by Charles Cheshire together with architect Jon Wealleans.



Planting for spring

Camellia 'Cornish Spring' AGM (above far left), *Tasmannia lanceolata* (syn. *Drimys lanceolata*, above left) and *Scilla siberica* AGM (above) are among the shrubs and bulbs in this uplifting spring performance.



Drifts of scillas and hellebores

A torrent of blue *Scilla siberica* surges down a shady bank in the Stroll Garden between mounds of ferns and hellebores, including some fine green and black selections.

Anne Olivieri compares walking around her 3.2ha (8 acre) garden near Inkberrow, Worcestershire to attending a promenade performance, in which you follow the actors and the action around a series of spaces during the course of a play. 'Here you are led from one stage set to the next, and slowly the story is told,' she says.

These settings radiate around an imposing red-brick Georgian house, which Anne and her husband René purchased in 2007. It was not so much the house that won them over on their initial visit, they told me. It was the superb views of the Malvern Hills and the Welsh mountains that the house enjoys from its perch on a sandstone escarpment – Anne, originally from Germany, and René, from Oregon, USA, are great fans of the British countryside. And it was also the beauty of the spring bulbs, for the meadow grass around the house was not only strewn with wild daffodils but also splashed crimson and white with snake's head fritillaries.

In the intervening years, thousands more bulbs have been added, creating ever more bewitching tapestries. You meet them as soon as you enter the curving entrance drive, and catch your first view of the house lapped by lawn and framed by trees and shrubs – the airy scene having benefited from the removal of heavy evergreens after the Olivieris' arrival.

Journey of creation

Morton Hall has been Anne's first big garden project, though in the past she enjoyed growing plants on her Berlin balcony, and she also created a town garden in Oxford.

While garden visiting in Gloucestershire, she came upon the secret garden at Sudeley Castle designed by Charles Chesshire – a plantsman and the former curator of nearby Burford House Gardens – and she decided Charles was the man to design Morton Hall, too. 'We talked a lot about how to plan it. I wanted a sense of openness, not of closed compartments, and for the house and garden to talk to each other. It was Charles's idea to design the garden as a journey around the house, with each part clearly defined but flowing into the next.'

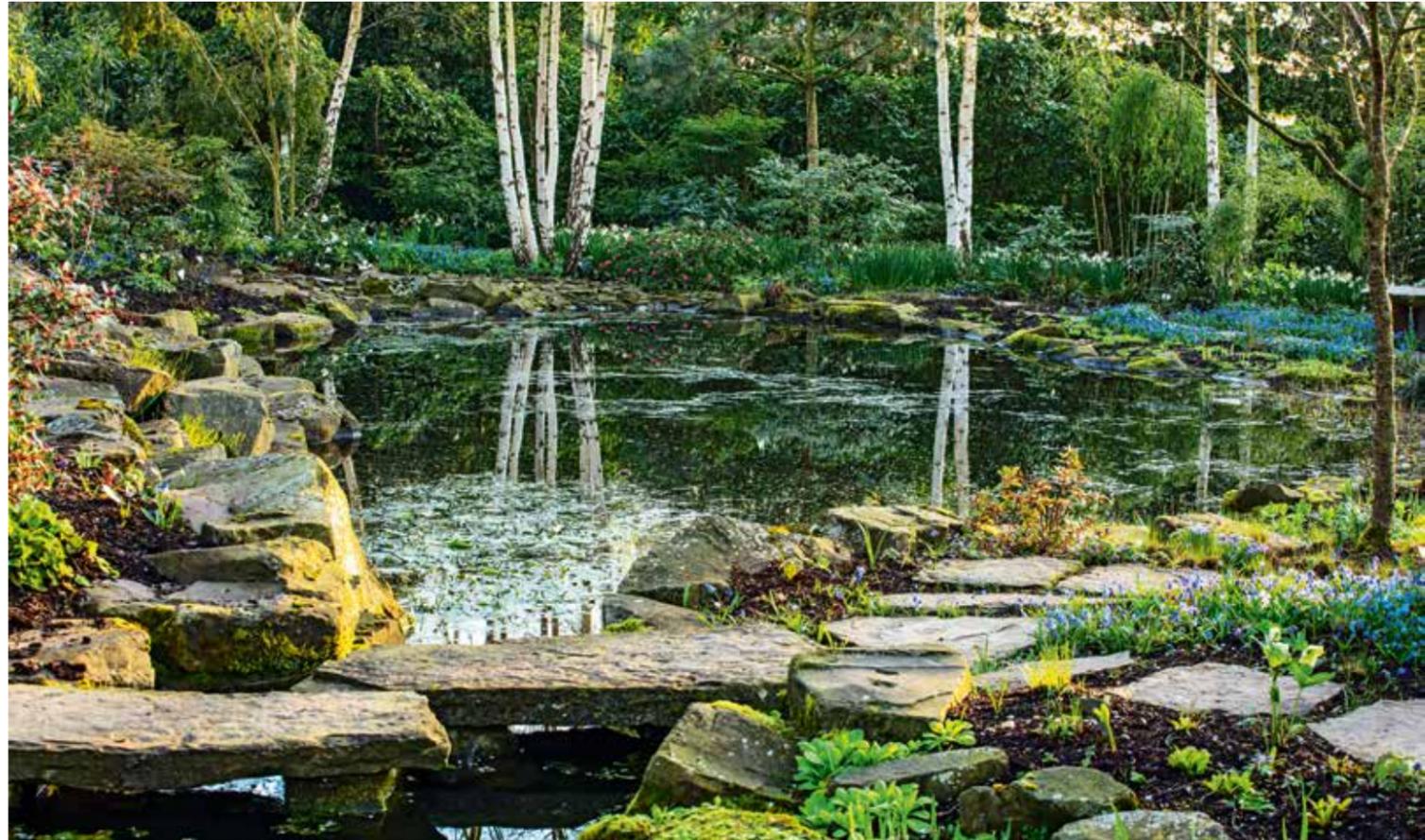
North of the drive, the garden is expansive and informal. Close to the house, birch trunks and the blossom of amelanchiers and pale pink cherries – *Prunus x yedoensis* followed by *P. 'Shogetsu'* AGM – accompany bulbs including *Tulipa turkestanica* AGM, magenta *T. humilis* 'Persian Pearl' and deep pink *T. humilis* 'Helene', which have so far proved perennial. These tulips, together with any other bulbs attractive to squirrels, are dusted with chilli powder at planting time – an effective deterrent.

Loose domes of clipped evergreen *Viburnum tinus* 'Eve Price' AGM demarcate this space from the larger, more open area known as Parkland Meadow, where there is the architectural eyecatching flourish of a circular colonnade – known as a monopteros in Greek antiquity, it was designed by Anne's brother in law and made of sandstone. Here daffodils are massed between cedar, whitebeam, Lombardy poplar and other trees. Many of these daffodils are our native Lent lily (*Narcissus lobularis*), and Anne thinks they were introduced here in 1905, when many of the trees were planted. Pools of blue and white crocus precede them, and later comes what she calls her 'magic carpet', when cowslips, primroses, oxlips, *Narcissus poeticus* and *N. 'Cragford'*, white anemones and violets mingle through the fritillaries. The vignettes are delightfully composed – photographs are taken of them in flower, and the groups are added to with the aid of a map: the planning and maintenance of the garden at Morton Hall is ordered and meticulous. Alliums, camassias and buttercups give the finale, and the meadow is cut down in mid-June with a flail mower.

Spring colour is picked up on the other side of the drive, where paths meander into two distinct areas, each with its own atmospheric setting. The Stroll Garden, taking its inspiration from Japan, is presided over by a handsome tea house, from which you descend into a rocky water garden. Here, white *Narcissus 'Thalia'* is massed around birch trunks, together with a torrent of electric-blue *Scilla siberica* AGM, deliciously partnered in places with coal-black hellebores. Maples add their emergent tints, and cherry blossom comes from *Prunus incisa* f. *yamadei* AGM and pale pink *P. 'Fugenzo'* AGM.

Crossing the water by stepping stones – 'The Steps of Doom' – you find yourself in a rock glade, where chunks of Kington sandstone are arrayed like a tumbling glacier. Here, white scillas and *Narcissus 'Ice Wings'* AGM partner ferns and hellebores, and blossom comes from Judas trees. Up the steps beyond is a string of further gardens, both formal and sinuous, lively with tulips in spring (a spectacle staged in collaboration with Bloms Bulbs) but mostly geared towards summer – at which time I shall be returning to visit, to describe here in a future issue of *The Garden*.

Eclectic scenery unified by exuberant planting is my first impression of Morton Hall. 'My taste is cosmopolitan. Beauty is what matters,' says Anne. And appropriately, given the theatrical concept behind her garden, profits of her garden openings go to the Royal Shakespeare Company. ○



Reflective qualities

Stepping stones cross the pool in the Stroll Garden, with birch trunks making striking vertical punctuation and linear reflections in the water. *Prunus incisa* f. *yamadei* floats white blossom above the spring bulbs and perennials.



Spring dawn

Sunlight glints through Lombardy poplars in the Parkland Meadow, where snake's head fritillaries colonise the grass. The naturalised bulbs here are thought to date back to Edwardian times.

Morton Hall's inspiring spring planting

Location: 200m (650ft) above sea level, near Redditch, Worcestershire.

Standout plants: in spring, massed daffodils – especially *Narcissus lobularis* and *N. poeticus* – snake's head fritillaries, scillas, tulips and other bulbs. Hellebores and *Pulmonaria* 'Blue Ensign' AGM also feature, together with the blossom of cherries, camellias and rhododendrons. The garden is planned for all-year interest.

Garden style: gardens of varying character and content are set out in a circuit around the house, comprising formal and informal areas, meadows, productive gardens, a rock garden, and a Japanese water garden with tea house.

Open: to groups by appointment, April–Sept: morton.garden@mhcom.co.uk Morton Hall Gardens Tulip Festival in association with Bloms Bulbs is 4–6 May; tickets rsc.org.uk/morton-hall

Website: mortonhallgardens.co.uk includes a Journal by Head Gardener Harry Green.



Prunus x yedoensis



Magnolia 'Butterflies'