Walking in a Winter Wonderland

The Winter Garden at Cambridge University Botanic Garden turns 40 this year – and is more beautiful than ever. Alice Ryan takes a tour...
It’s a bright winter’s morning and there’s not a soul to be seen, aside from a large and handsome dog fox,padding along the path and into a border. Weaving his way through the stems of ruddy cornus, he stops to nose through a pile of mulch, seemingly on the hunt for a breakfast worm.

“I’ve worked here for three years and that’s only the second fox I’ve seen: you’re honoured,” says gardener David Austrin. “It’s quite a magical spot, though, this.”

We’re standing within the Winter Garden at Cambridge University Botanic Garden. Turning 40 this year, it set a trend for winter ornamental planting which continues to this day, sparking similar displays in open gardens across the country (including Anglesey Abbey’s winter walk, which famously culminates in a copse of ghostly white-barked birch trees).

The brainchild of then-garden superintendent Peter Orriss and supervisor Norman Villis, the Winter Garden broke horticultural boundaries when it was installed. Replacing serried ranks of planting with a naturalised scheme, set out around the dog fox’s meandering path, Orriss and Villis undertook major earthworks to create a pair of south-facing valleys.

“It was all about the light,” explains now-demonstration and display supervisor Peter Kerley, who’s been at the Botanic Garden since 1976 and saw the winter borders take shape. “The low winter sun backlights one side of the path and spotlights the other, bringing out all the colours of the different leaves and stems. “When the light hits it just right, the peeling bark of the paperbark maple, Acer griseum, looks like it’s been set aflame – it’s quite amazing.”

The most visited university botanic garden in the UK, Cambridge University Botanic Garden spans 40 acres, houses more than 8,000 species, and has welcomed a record 300,000 visitors this year alone. Grade II* listed, it supports university teaching and research as well as providing enjoyment and inspiration to members of the public.

Pete joined the gardening team in 1976 – “the year I was born, which I like to remind him regularly,” laughs David, assistant horticulturalist – and planned only to complete an apprenticeship before moving on.

“But it gets under your skin, this place,” he says. “I love it here. Watching something like the Winter Garden grow and evolve is hugely satisfying. I actually remember the paperbark maple going in the ground; it was only yea high, and look at it now!”

The maple is far from the only species bringing colour into the borders: blood-red dogwoods stand proud in front of velvety yews; fire-orange willows are pollarded to produce spiky handfuls of ‘witch’s fingers’; masses of sun-yellow bamboo stems carry frowsy clouds of apple-green leaf.

And it’s not only colour that draws the eye. Architectural seed heads, from tall teasels to tussocky sedums, punctuate the planting, and great clumps of miscanthus grass shimmer in the slightest of breeze.

Then there’s the scent: the moment you arrive at the entranceway, you’re greeted by the sweet smell of daphne blossom.

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“The Daphne bholua ‘Jacqueline Postill’ is especially fragrant; you want to bottle it, don’t you?” says David. “The little patch of grass just in front of it is always worn bare by spring, because so many people stop to sniff it.”

David became a gardener 10 years ago, leaving a job at Radio 5 Live, where he was a producer. “I had green fingers, I loved being outdoors, and I realised that if I didn’t make a change then – I was 32 – I probably never would.

“It really was the best decision I could have made. As this area of the garden proves, even in the dead of winter I’m working in the most beautiful surroundings.”

Though some of the planting, notably the major trees, has been in place since day one, Pete and David say the borders are ever-evolving, in response to both fashions and the need to replace faded specimens.

In the late Seventies, for example, heathers and conifers were all the rage. Now exotics are playing a focal part: take the rare and under-threat ‘tangle bush’ (Muehlenbeckia astonii) from New Zealand, a spooky mass of a shrub, and the Japanese ‘wineberry’ (Rubus phoenicolasius), with its bounteous fruits and bristly, arching red stems.

Leading the way down a secluded side path – “the kids are always the first to find it: they like the feeling of going on an adventure, I think” – David points out other gems, including a tactile snake-bark maple (“We actually encourage people to stroke it, because they polish it up”).

“On a day like this – on most days, in fact – there’s nowhere I’d rather be,” adds David. “This area of the garden has a special atmosphere. You’d never know you were in the middle of a city, would you?”
POSITIVE PLANTING

Feeling inspired? Pete and David list their top 10 plants for creating a wondrous winter garden

Acer griseum, the paperbark maple. A beautiful small tree, with cinnamon coloured, flaking bark. Introduced from China by Ernest Wilson in 1901, it’s purposely planted in the Winter Garden so the peeling bark is backlit by the low winter sun.

Betula utilis, subspecies albosinensis. A multi-stemmed tree with cream, grey and pink peeling bark. We now know that this tree was propagated from an original introduction by Ernest Wilson from Western China in 1901, and has subsequently been given the cultivar name ‘China Ruby’.

Chimonanthus praecox ‘Grandiflorus’, the Chinese wintersweet. A medium-sized deciduous shrub for a sunny position, its spicy scented, deep yellow, waxy flowers are conspicuously stained with red at the base. Flowers, which are reasonably frost resistant, appear January/February.

Cornus sanguinea ‘Midwinter Fire’. A vigorous suckering deciduous dogwood, with vivid pinky orange stems, it’s best hard pruned in spring to encourage young wood. It was discovered in Germany around 1980.

Daphne bholua ‘Jacqueline Postill’. One of the best upright scented evergreen winter flowering shrubs, its clusters of magenta pink flowers fill the air with fragrance from late December to March. Raised by Alan Postill, propagator at Hilliers Nursery in the 1980s, he named it after his wife.

Galanthus ‘Magnet’. ‘Magnet’ is a very old snowdrop cultivar raised by the famous breeder James Allen, circa 1888. It is easily recognized by its long arching pedicels (flower stalks) allowing the flowers to nod gracefully in the breeze. It flowers January to March.

Hamamelis x intermedia ‘Jelena’, a hybrid witch hazel. ‘Jelena’ flowers are bright coppery orange, glowing in the low winter sun. This free flowering cultivar was raised at Kalmthout Arboretum in Belgium and named by M.M. de Belder after his wife. The flowers, which are frost resistant, unfurl as early as December.

Rubus thibetanus ‘Silver Fern’, the ghost bramble. A suckering deciduous shrub, it’s grown for its arching stems covered in myriads of tiny red bristles and a white bloom.

Salix alba var. vitellina ‘Britzensis’, the scarlet willow. Pollarded annually in spring, it produces numerous vigorous bright red stems for winter colour and structure.

Viburnum x bodnantense ‘Charles Lamont’. A large deciduous shrub with cerise pink scented flowers borne in clusters, which open in milder spells throughout the winter months. It was bred by Charles Lamont, assistant curator at Edinburgh Botanic Garden, in 1933.

VISITING HOURS

The Botanic Garden is open daily from 10am and a trail guide can be picked up at the ticket office or downloaded at botanic.cam.ac.uk.

Free one-hour guided tours of the Winter Garden will take place every Sunday through January and February on a first come, first served basis. Visitors are requested to sign up at Brookside Gate on the day and are advised that numbers are limited. Tours leave from Glasshouse Terrace at 2.30pm. Normal garden admission applies.

Winter Highlight group tours, which include hot drinks and cake in the Garden Cafe, run from now until February, at 10am or 1.30pm for one hour. They cost £6 per person, plus normal garden admission. Each tour can accommodate up to 20 people. At least two weeks’ advance notice is required for bookings, which should be made by calling (01223) 748450.

A Winter Garden course: 40 years of the Winter Garden, takes place on February 9, 10am-1pm. A chance to join horticulturist David Austrin for a morning discovering which plants make the Winter Garden special, his top plants for winter colour and advice on how to incorporate them into winter plantings at home, places on the course cost £35. To book go to botanic.cam.ac.uk