

Winter beauty

Structural elements – from formal topiary and wild grasses to water features and pebbled paths – come into their own during the colder months and have an allure that rivals spring and summer blooms

1.

Composition of living sculpture

A sculpted copper beech spiral, surrounded by layered beech and domed yew topiary, provides a playful focal point and year-round structure at the north corner of the house at Allt-y-bela in Monmouthshire, home of garden designer Arne Maynard and his partner William Collinson. Arne says: “Topiary forms provide wonderful structure in a garden, offering anchorage, scale and contrast for softer summer herbaceous planting and as important winter interest. I see them as individual characters, acting a part in the wider garden performance. I love seeing them dusted with frost or snow in the colder months, playing a game of dramatic shadows on the frozen white lawns when the garden can be at its most atmospheric.”

FEATURE JACKY HOBBS PHOTOGRAPH BRITT WILLOUGHBY DYER



2. Decorative tracery

'In the winter, the formal shapes of topiary and hedges give a sense of structure and contrast when set amongst shrubs and the tracery of grasses and herbaceous plants,' says garden designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd of the gardens at Gresgarth Hall, her home in Lancashire. 'The wonderful pebble mosaic I commissioned from Maggy Howarth is based on my family's four signs of the zodiac with hints towards our love of architecture and plants as well as the dramatic north-west weather.' A sharp frost brings these hard-landscaping details and selected plant silhouettes to the fore. Changes in texture and material are whitened and heightened; mounded foliage spheres and gauzy frost-rimmed grasses contrast swirling pebble pathways, crisp, clean-cut lawns, sharp, evergreen uprights and clean-clipped evergreen hedges.

3. Iced architecture

Landscape architects Paul Maymont and François Herbert Stevens were instrumental in creating the striking, evergreen carved topiary and hedges which decorate Les Jardins du Château de la Ballue, Brittany, France. The 21st-century owner of this dedicated *Jardins Remarquable*, Marie-Francoise Mathon, has continued the development of a living art gallery, bold, dramatic, artful topiary designs comprised of three-dimensional, classical and contemporary interpretations, sculpted living plants, hewn yew, *Taxus baccata*, and boxwood, *Buxus sempervirens*. Uninterrupted by other plant material, their cutting-edge silhouettes are as bold as any bronze garden sculptures which delight all year round, especially defined in wintertime when frost and snow, the icing on the cake, add a new, contrasting dimension to their evergreen forms. →



PHOTOGRAPHS (2) JANE SEBIRE; (3) YANN MONEL



4. Flowers and fragrance

Russell Watkins, RHS horticulturalist, has developed an alternative to winter brights, with a softer, more fragrant plant palette (Winter Walk, Harlow Carr), which awakens senses, with a complementary scheme of fragrant pink, purple and white flowers. These tones flush across honey-scented heathers, including *Erica x darleyensis* f. *albiflora* 'Silberschmelze', and echo the soft-pink-eared catkins of *Salix gracilistyla* 'Mount Aso'. Perfumed daphnes fill the sun-warmed winter-air, attracting early pollinators; *Daphne bholua* 'Peter Smithers' has purple buds and pale pink flowers; and long-and-white-flowering *Daphne bholua* 'Cobhay Snow' has an incredible scent. Golden witch hazels, hamamelis, disrupt the colour scheme, but their fragrant flowers are invaluable; especially irresistible are the spicy-scented blooms of *H.* 'Aurora' and *H.* 'Rochester'.

5. Garden of a goddess

Oli Johnson, head gardener at Morton Hall Gardens, emphasises the importance of the arrangement and placement of spheres and statues. 'It's important in winter to use strong forms to anchor the space, when the more delicate herbaceous plants have died down. The formal spheres of the box balls give a sense of solidity, but the repeat undulations soften the overall impact, whilst the surfaces allow a resting place for the snow and the sunlight. These curves work in contrast to the upright verticals of the oak arbour posts, and the soft, chalk-white figure of Demeter in the background. The statue is given prominence and granted a well-defined outline due to its placement against the uniform green backdrop of clipped yew hedge.



PHOTOGRAPHS (4) RICHARD BLOOM; (5) CLIVE NICHOLS



6. Still water

The serpentine curves of the canal at Bryan's Ground, Herefordshire, bring rhythm and movement to the frozen landscape of the orchard. On the former site of an 'arrow-straight, gravel driveway', the garden has a water-filled centrepiece devised by Simon Dorrell, 'its serpentine line directly related to the fulcrum created by alternate, offset trees. The backdrop of copper-tone beech hedging ties in with its brickwork edging. The mirror-like shallow water is deliberately plant-free to reflect light back into the north-facing house whilst capturing the skeletal reflections of trees, borrowing outlines from the landscape, colour, clouds and movement from the sky. The sculptural design works so well in winter, the bones of the design laid bare.' →

PHOTOGRAPH CLIVE NICHOLS



7. Grass fountains

The horizontal, structural geometry of a fountaining rill is complemented by vertical hornbeam hedging. Bleached and frosted grasses cascade and soften the copper-toned garden, bathed in winter light. Anoushka Feiler's design is as 'beautiful in winter as in summer. Plants with interesting structure combined to create a considered winter tableau. A garden should be a pleasure to look out on to at all times of the year, especially with the trend to enlarge windows and doors and to create a seamless transition from the inside to the outside. The planting has a formal backbone of topiary, hedges, trees and strong seed heads, counteracted by effervescent ornamental grasses.'

PHOTOGRAPH CLIVE NICHOLS



8. Stone, structure and softness

Garden designer Katie Guillebaud softens textural hard landscaping with rotund evergreen planting with perennial, feathered grasses and structural seed heads. 'This main axis border edges the path to the front door and needs to look good, but not static, throughout the seasons. I chose summer-flowering *Sedum* 'Matrona', *Scabiosa columbaria* and *Origanum laevigatum* 'Herrenhausen' for colour and movement – they also retain beautiful contrasting seed heads in winter. Clipped yew, *Taxus baccata*, and sage-green phillyrea are planted at repeated intervals and provide a foil for the wispy, fountaining shapes of the grasses, *Stipa calamagrostis*, *S. tenuissima* and *S. gigantea*. The new cobbled pathway, which seems like it's been there forever, also makes a great textural, winter-frost-rimmed, hard landscape feature which binds the overall design.

9. Deep freeze

The classical rectangular design of a kitchen garden is revealed, emboldened by sub-zero conditions, the geometry of beds of winter veg and year-round herbs sits in a skeleton framework of filigree, pruned and trained fruit trees which frame this year-round productive enclave. 'In winter, the key elements of a design are laid bare so structures and shapes become so important,' says garden designer Libby Russell. In her Somerset kitchen garden, she 'trains fruit trees into goblet and espalier forms, roses over hoops and plants winter vegetables in patterns to create visual interest, even in the depths of winter – and, of course, the frost makes all these shapes even more magical.' 🍷



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