



Star with royal beauty bright

The Savill Garden, Windsor Great Park, Berkshire

New Year in The Queen's most interesting public garden is invigorated by young and colourful plantings, finds George Plumptre

Photographs by Marianne Majerus

DESPITE having one of the most formidable plant collections in Britain, the Savill Garden, in Windsor Great Park, has admirably retained the character of its woodland setting and original landscaping, which dates from the 1930s. At no time is this more evident than in winter, when many plants are dormant and the garden's structure of topography, trees and water is clearly revealed.

Nonetheless, although there is not the cornucopia that is so evident in this remarkable garden at other times of the year, winter is the moment to enjoy a collection of seasonal treats and rarities and to absorb the manner in which they're displayed. This is exemplified by a tapestry of dogwoods, catching the eye almost as soon as you enter the garden.

Pruned annually to display the vivid tints of their young stems, they are arranged

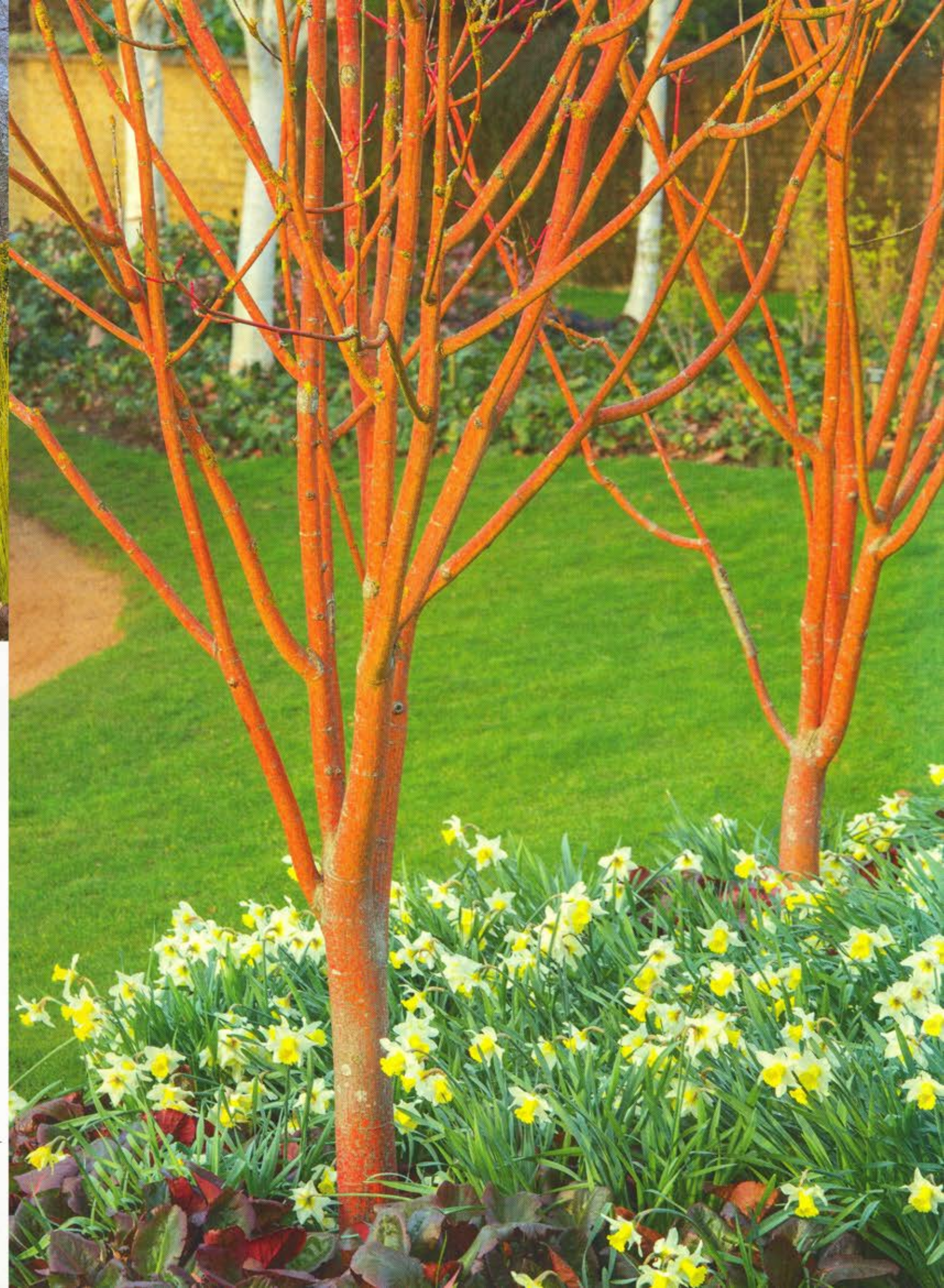
in a wonderfully subtle grading of colours from pale, greeny-yellow to rich purple. Each shade is represented by carefully selected cultivars, such as *Cornus sanguinea* Anny's Winter Orange. The same is true of the nearby clusters of special willows that revel in the damp ground along the stream flowing between the garden's two ponds. Among numerous unusual cultivars, the flame-orange *Salix alba* var. *vitellina* Yelverton deserves special mention, blazing through even the most leaden of winter days.

Mark Flanagan, who took over as Keeper of the Gardens in 1997, explains that such selective planting is a key priority that perpetuates a tradition stretching back to the garden's origins. The idea of creating a garden in the overgrown area towards the south-east edge of Windsor Great Park came from Eric Savill, who, in 1930, gave up his partnership

in a family firm of chartered surveyors to become Deputy Surveyor of Windsor Park and Woods, moving on a few years later to the most senior position of Deputy Ranger. (The Ranger has always been a member of the Royal Family or someone close to them; currently, The Duke of Edinburgh holds the title.)

By the end of the 1930s, Savill had organised the clearing of undergrowth and made a water garden of two ponds linked by a stream, from what had been low-lying, boggy ground. He then began planting carefully selected ornamental trees and shrubs whose positioning, among the ancient oaks and beeches of the Windsor forest, was chosen with equal care.

Top: A rainbow effect made with dogwoods. Facing page: *Acer x conspicuum* Phoenix with *Narcissus* Spring Dawn





Above: Sumptuous and early, *Rhododendron Airy Fairy*. Above right: Exquisite *Tulipa biflora* unfurls. Right: Tough-leaved *Helleborus x sternii* Blackthorn Group

Savill's contribution was recognised in 1951, when George VI formally renamed the garden the Savill Garden and he was knighted in 1955. His legacy has been nurtured by those who have succeeded him, including Mr Flanagan and his team, led by head gardener Harvey Stephens.

Woodland gardens of this type are traditionally at their best in spring. One of Savill's most important decisions was for different areas of the garden to provide a succession of seasonal highlights, as Mr Flanagan explains: 'Developing the theme of gardens within gardens.' The other fundamental applied



Below: Crocus-like *Tulipa humilis*, a wild species of the Levant. Below right: Witch hazel *Hamamelis x intermedia* Aphrodite



Winter's cheer

Mark Flanagan recommends:

***Betula utilis* var *jacquemontii* Grays-wood Ghost** Arguably, the most satisfying of the *jacquemontii* varieties of the Himalayan birch with chalk-white bark

***Acer x conspicuum* Phoenix** Snakebark maples have long been favourites for British gardeners because of their patterned trunks

Leucojum vernum* var *carpathicum The white petal tips of its large, snowdrop-like flowers are dabbled with bright yellow, instead of the more usual green

***Hamamelis x intermedia* Aphrodite** Combines many of the best qualities you could wish for in a witch hazel, bearing abundant, scented orange-red flowers and brilliant autumn colour

by Savill was to build up planting in layers, down from the original high canopy of forest trees to smaller ornamental trees, such as magnolias, to large shrubs, such as the rhododendron collection, and down to smaller shrubs, herbaceous plants and, finally, low bulbs and ground cover.

Today, different areas have seasonal names and, at this time of year, the Winter Beds—with the sweeps of dogwoods and willows on both sides—are resplendent with layers of luminous bark, warm-coloured stems and foliage and small treasures at ground level. There are rarities such as *Prunus rufa* (a form of *P. serotina* famous for its bark), grown from seed collected in the 1970s in the eastern Himalayas, or eye-catching combinations such as narcissus and bergenias or the reliable winter-flowering *Daphne bholua*. Jacqueline Postill joined by bronze-black leaved *Ophiopogon*.

Many of the Savill Garden's national collection of *Mahonia* cultivars can be found in the winter beds, but a select group of tender ones enjoys the protection of the Temperate House; within it thrives the elegant *Mahonia gracilipes* that was introduced from China by Roy Lancaster in 1980. Mr Stephens makes the point that the seasonal interest of winter can be found throughout the gardens, not just in the named 'winter' areas.

Some of his favourites are in the gravel garden, where the natural style of planting is particularly evident and where the glowing cinnamon bark of the hybrid strawberry tree *Arbutus x andrachnoides* contrasts with clumps of the semi-transparent grass *Molinia* Windspiel.

I remember when the broad bank overlooking the lower pond was one of the Savill Garden's most haunting woodland sights, with a stand of huge beech trees towering over a carpet of moss. The 1987 hurricane blew down virtually all of them and an irreplaceable



Rising from a carpet of variegated ivy, *Cornus sanguinea* Anny's Winter Orange

spectacle disappeared overnight; now, at one end of the bank, beds of New Zealand species display many plants that have particular winter interest because of their structure and form. Not least among them is a mesmerising network of purple stems of *Muehlenbeckia astonii* and the sword-like leaves of *Phormium tenax*.

A winter visit to the Savill Garden reveals the intense preparation that goes on at this time of year as the different areas are given the appropriate attention to ensure that they perform to their best in the following season. Within the Golden Jubilee Garden, created in 2002 to designs by Barbara Hunt, there are just the sweeping lines of the yew hedges and paths as all the plants in the beds have been removed so that an infestation of bindweed can be controlled. The beds will be replanted in time to flower next summer. The sheer size of the main herbaceous borders is clearly

evident without any plants and, towards their top end, the enormous domed canopy of noble *Acer x freemanii* has dropped a carpet of pale yellow-green leaves in a sweeping circle below, making for one of the most arresting pictures of my visit.

It's 35 years since the death of Savill in 1980, but there is no doubt that he would instantly recognise his garden today and applaud the manner in which it combines the legacy of his creation with a vigorous tradition of innovation.

The Savill Garden, Wick Lane, Englefield Green, Berkshire, TW20 0UU. To find the garden using satnav, you need to key in the postcode TW20 0XD. The website for the garden is very informative—visit www.theroyallandscape.co.uk. The garden opens daily all year round, entry \$9.50. Throughout January and February 2015, entry is free