

# SEASONAL *reflections*

Almost obliterated in a single night during the great storm of 1987, the glorious grounds of Sheffield Park in East Sussex are once again a blaze of brilliant colour in autumn, thanks to years of careful planning and imaginative planting

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**THIS PICTURE** The view from across the lake of Sheffield Park House framed by fiery autumn foliage





Serenely gliding over the glassy waters of Sheffield Park's largest lake, the lone swan leaves barely a ripple. The reflections wrinkle for a second or two, then ease once more into a perfect mirror of the fiery banks – lambent tongues of orange, gold and vermilion burning brightly against a cobalt sky. For head gardener Andy Jesson, there could be no more telling metaphor. On the surface, all is effortless and calm. Beneath that appearance of flawless tranquillity, however, there's some fairly frantic paddling going on.

The smooth, grassy banks that allow such still, clean reflections are not the work of nature but of fortnightly sessions with a mower and strimmer. Debris is painstakingly removed from the water's surface and the balance of water lilies (a fabulous show in summer) to open water is carefully managed, as is the flow through the lakes to keep those lilies in peak condition (dying foliage would ruin the effect) and maintain the crystalline clarity.

It's worth any amount of effort, because for Andy, this is the very essence of the garden – memorably described by Virginia Woolf as “the trance of water”. It is this numinous meeting of tree, water and sky that gives the garden its peaceful, dreamy quality. “It doubles the impact of the planting, which is

already big and bold,” Andy says. Everything here is done on a lavish scale – the four interlinking lakes are deep and wide; the planting that surrounds them is extravagant. This is a landscape built up layer by layer by ambitious – even reckless – men who fell hard in love with it and gave it their all.

The first to leave his mark was John Baker Holroyd, created Earl of Sheffield in 1816. In 1776 he engaged Capability Brown to remodel a formal park in the latest landscape style. Brown filled the base of the valley with one of his characteristically curving elongated lakes (now divided into two), creating a much more open and grassy effect than can be seen today. Landscape gardener Humphry Repton appears to have tinkered higher up the valley from 1789–90, but the next fiesta of garden-making came in 1880, when the third earl engaged the great landscapers of the Victorian era, James Pulham & Son, to build a mighty cascade between the two upper lakes, and planted them round with the magnificent new conifers flooding in from the Americas. To these he added bright-leaved Japanese acers and swathes of azaleas and rhododendrons. His first priority, though, was to create a cricket pitch in the park, host to the first ever match between England and Australia.

The third earl spent so lavishly, though, that he died penniless. Chief among his creditors was



**THIS PAGE** *Nyssa sylvatica* by the water's edge **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** *Quercus rubra*; *Cortaderia selloana* with bright *Acer palmatum* 'Atropurpureum'; glorious *Liquidambar styraciflua*; purple cornus contrasts with *Nyssa sylvatica*; vast *Sequoiadendron giganteum*; golden *Ginkgo biloba* with a red acer in the distance





It is the meeting of tree, water and sky that gives the garden its dreamy quality



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The vivid reflections of flaming foliage make the displays of autumn colour even more spectacular; mallards shelter under an overhanging branch; the *Nyssa sylvatica* at Sheffield Park are the oldest and largest in Britain and are very much the signature tree of the garden

Arthur Gilstrap Soames, an ardent rhododendron-fancier who eagerly snapped up the park in 1910. It was he who planted the banks with more Japanese maples, liquidambars, scarlet oaks and tawny swamp cypresses. Among his introductions were seedlings of 450 *Nyssa sylvatica*; now the oldest and largest in Britain and very much the garden's signature tree.

When Andy Jesson arrived in 2002, though, he found a garden in trouble. The great storm of 1987 had decimated the garden, destroying more than 2,000 shrubs and trees, while the gales of 1990 had worsened the damage. Despite every effort, the decade of replanting that followed failed to establish. Belatedly it was realised that, as the trees had been torn up out of the ground, they had also uprooted the drainage system put in by Soames, meaning the new specimens could not thrive in the cold, sodden soil. Andy's priority was to oversee the installation of a new land-drainage system covering three-fifths of the

garden. His next step was to draw up a conservation plan: "There's been a garden here for 300 years - our job was to preserve it for the next 300," he explains.

While for most of us, looking even a decade ahead is something of a challenge, such time frames are only sensible when you are planting the next generation of oaks and redwoods, cedars and pines. For Andy, the chief glory of this garden was its unique plant collection, and what the storms had made clear was just how vulnerable it was. Miraculously, monumental trees, such as an 18m Montezuma pine, 28m Monterey pine and 40m giant redwood, had survived. But they had never been propagated: had they fallen, there were no younger trees to take their place. Andy immediately set to work, establishing new stock in 'safe houses' throughout Britain: should disaster ever strike again, there would be a bank of young plants from which to replenish. That work continues: every year the gardeners collect seed from ten different species

to grow on, while special plants are grafted so that rare genetic material (such as several *nyssas* known only in this garden) can be preserved. Eventually, the young trees are replanted, ensuring a succession as the older trees reach, and pass, their peak. More than 4,000 new trees and shrubs have been introduced over the past 12 years.

Taking a 300-year perspective means Andy can afford to be patient. Planting a small seed-grown tree was very much at odds with the 'instant gardening' ethos of the Noughties. Yet he found, in a series of experiments, that his tiny trees soon caught up with bought-in larger specimens, and invariably established more successfully. The garden is never watered, and Andy doesn't use fertilisers or pesticides, but simply sites carefully, plants bare-root in autumn and mulches generously. He has revived the Victorian technique of mound-planting, used by Soames, and found it most effective. "We want this garden to be at the forefront of sustainable gardening," Andy declares. A succession of healthy plantings that can thrive without intervention is, in his view, the best way to future-proof the landscape. The risks are many - climate change, a rash of new plant diseases, even thunderbolts. The garden, it transpires, sits in the middle of a lightning field: every few years a healthy tree gets blasted out of the ground, while the dovecote has been hit at least five times.

"Not one of the major designers that has been involved here has ever wiped the slate clean and started again," Andy observes. "They have always worked with what was here and enhanced it." The result is a tapestry of form and texture of extraordinary subtlety and complexity - full but never jostling, rich but never overblown. "We work hard to make sure our new planting sits comfortably in the landscape - and it's so inspiring to think of it continuing to evolve long after we've gone."

📍 **Sheffield Park, Uckfield, East Sussex (01825 790231; [nationaltrust.org.uk/sheffield-park-and-garden](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/sheffield-park-and-garden)). Open daily except Christmas Day, from 10.30am (check website for closing times).**

**THIS PICTURE** Sunlight catches the beautiful glowing amber foliage of a moisture-loving *Taxodium distichum* or swamp cypress

#### TOP TREES FOR AUTUMN COLOUR

***Acer palmatum***  
'Osakazuki' One of the finest Japanese maples, bright scarlet in autumn

***Nyssa sylvatica***  
Reaches 10m; colourful slow-growing varieties; good for a damp site

***Liquidambar styraciflua***  
'Worplesdon' - shiny star-like foliage; 'Stella' - deeply cut leaves; 'Festival' - long display

***Fothergilla*** 2m shrub with dark, glossy leaves that turn red and orange

***Enkianthus campanulatus*** A blaze of colour with clusters of pink bells in May