

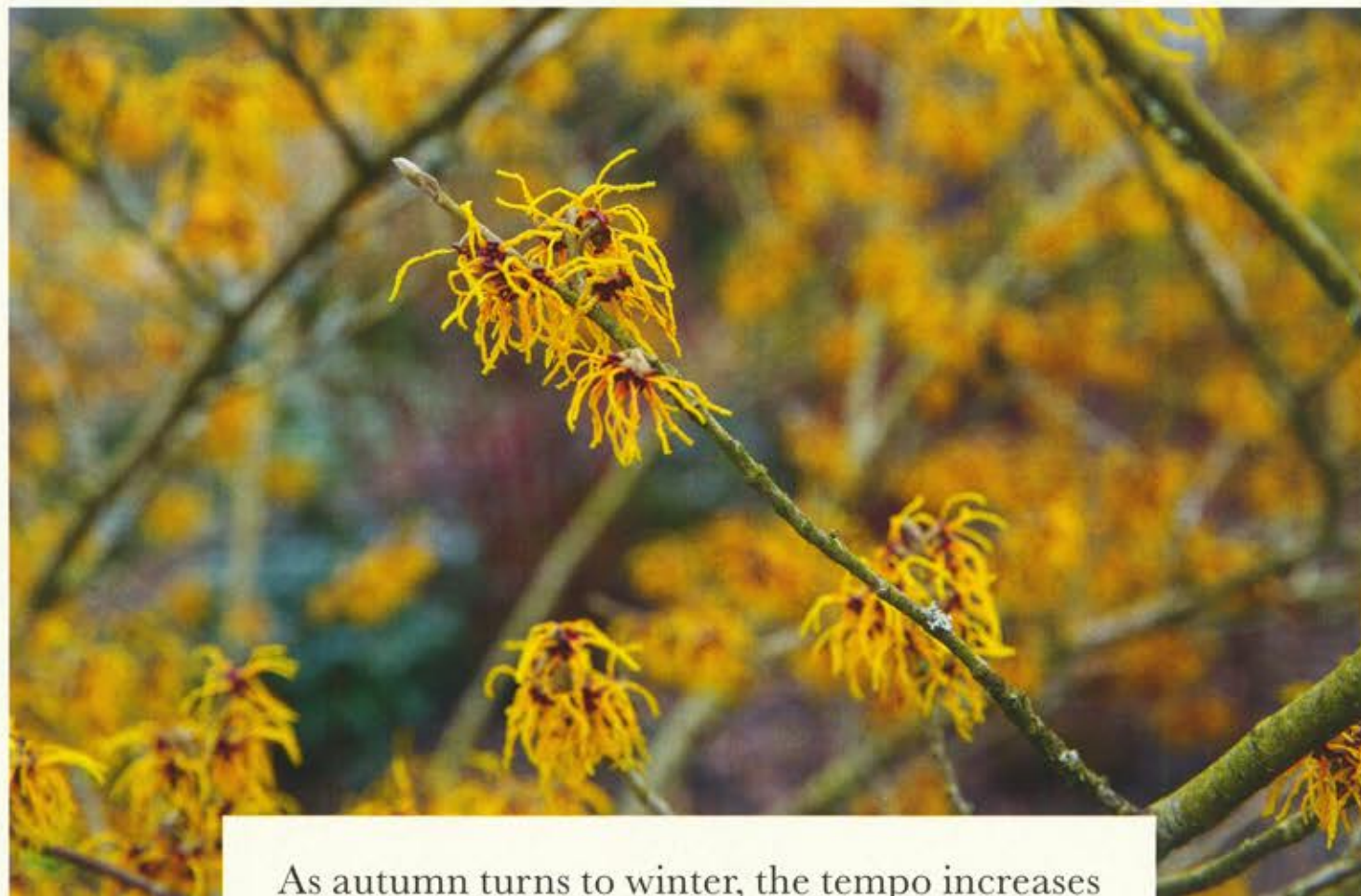
# BLAZE OF GLORY

At The Sir Harold Hillier Gardens in Hampshire, a highly considered planting scheme provides dramatic texture and fiery colour, even in the depths of winter

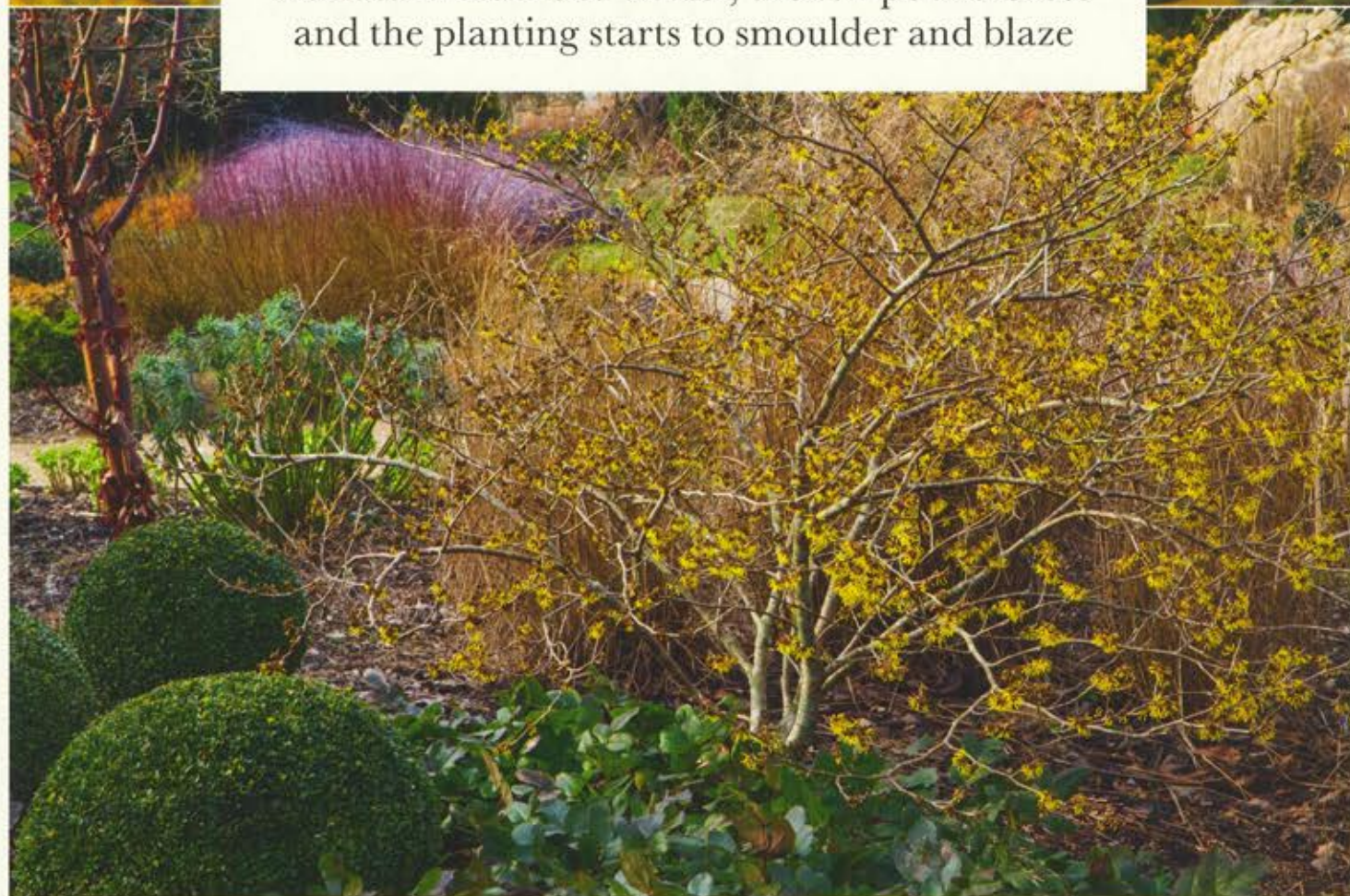
TEXT NAOMI SLADE | PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

In the winter light, the layered planting is full of dramatic contrasts. Fiery orange *Erica carnea* 'Foxhollow' stands out against dark *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens', from which rises a smoky haze of *Rubus cockburnianus*





As autumn turns to winter, the tempo increases and the planting starts to smoulder and blaze



OPPOSITE FROM TOP  
Spidery hamamelis  
flowers are deceptively  
robust in the face of  
winter cold. Repeating  
forms and plenty of  
texture give the garden  
strength of design.  
THIS PAGE Clumps of  
*Cyclamen coum* and  
*Galanthus nivalis* grow  
under a gnarled hornbeam





ABOVE FROM LEFT Set in a carpet of *Carex morrowii* 'Fisher's Form', red stems of *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' contrast with black *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb'. Molinia grass adds winter colour while biscuit-stemmed miscanthus provides a textural quality. The peeling bark of a birch is lit by the winter sun. THIS PICTURE *Cornus* 'Midwinter Fire' adds colour among the clipped evergreens

The garden in winter has a bit of a bad reputation. But get it right and even in the briefest, darkest days, the garden can glow with colour and energy, packed with charisma and filled with botanical bling. One of the largest winter gardens in the country is the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens near Romsey in Hampshire. Established 14 years ago, it extends to well over 10 acres and is accessed by a grassy circular path, backed up by a Tarmac outer perimeter as a wet-weather fail-safe.

In summer, the garden is quiet, the cool cascades of foliage and green hues giving no hint of its dynamic alter ego. But as autumn turns to winter, the tempo increases and the planting starts to smoulder and blaze. 'From November to March, the winter garden is laid completely bare and the evergreen structure comes to the fore,' explains head of collections David Jewell. 'It is the stem colour, bark colour and ground-cover bulb planting that brings it to life. When you come in on a cold morning and the plants are rimed with frost and laden with dew, it takes on a completely different quality.'

Island beds and weaving paths create a sense of depth and texture, with views through trees of coloured stems or soft grasses. Strong blocks of colour and upright forms catch the eye, while the scent of *Daphne bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill' and sarcococca hangs in the air. The plants lead you onwards, repeating ideas and colours; the eye bounces from dark plant to dark plant, a zigzag of black bamboo, ophiopogon and pittosporum, with the bright flare of *Cornus* 'Midwinter Fire' and golden bamboo in counterpoint.

Adding height and mystery, trees are an essential element in this garden, and the trunks of *Prunus serrula* and *P. rufa* emerge, like striped mahogany stockings, from an ankle-deep froth of evergreen planting, branches a sculpture of elbows and knuckles silhouetted against the sky. A trio of cinnamon-stemmed *Acer griseum* makes a subtly elegant statement and, sloughed of leaves, the birches are statuesque in nudity.

'All white-stemmed birches are tailor-made for a winter garden, but *Betula albosinensis*, with its pink and purple tones and a glaucous-grey bloom, is ideal both in groups and as a specimen,' says David. '*Betula albosinensis* 'Bowling Green', for example, has honey-coloured bark that peels beautifully into sheets. Witch hazels are a must, too. *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Pallida' is still the best for yellow, or for orange try *H. 'Aphrodite'*. The spider-like flowers are amazingly resistant to frost. You think you have lost it and then it bounces back.'

There are other, less obvious stars. *Cercidiphyllum* is lauded for its candyfloss autumn scent, but in winter the pendulous branches are offset handsomely by a sprinkle of cyclamen. Elsewhere a hornbeam is underplanted with *Cyclamen coum* and *Galanthus nivalis*. 'There is a

simplicity in the marbled foliage with the pink flowers and white snowdrops. It is perfect under deciduous trees,' says David.

In design, the garden is nothing if not confident, and bold blocks, massed planting, strong repeated shapes and assertively curvaceous lines assure impact. Perform it must, filling the stage with a flame and vigour amply supported by the subtleties and character of the component plants.

But acreage is not imperative in creating seasonal interest, and many specimens and combinations translate well into smaller spaces. *Rubus cockburnianus* 'Golden Vale', buttery in summer but powdery white in winter, is bordered with black *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens'. Vibrant *Cornus sanguinea* 'Anny's Winter Orange', underplanted with *Helleborus x hybridus* (Ashwood Garden hybrids), is simple and effective, as are the box balls, crisply sculptural against a white background of birch and snowdrops. The speckled snake-bark stems of *Acer rufrinerve* 'Erythrocladum' rise over a meadow of molinia and, nearby, plumply conical *Picea glauca* 'Alberta Blue' stand like penguins upon an ice floe of winter-flowering heathers and bulbs.

Fluttering pennants of miscanthus and peeling stems of *Acer griseum* lend themselves to other seasons, too, but many plants here specifically represent the best forms for winter interest. 'The yellow colour of *Pinus mugo* 'Winter Gold' intensifies in winter and it contrasts well with spiky phormiums, blue juniper and *Mahonia aquifolium* 'Apollo', explains David. '*Ilex aquifolium* 'Green Pillar' is good, too; it is arrow-shape with good structure. One of the best winter pines is *Pinus contorta* 'Chief Joseph'; it is compact and changes to vibrant yellow gold, although it is slightly specialist. Even a simple thing like laurel, kept under control, can be useful.'

The planted area has been recently extended, with the same assertive style and generous use of plants. 'It has been a great opportunity to experiment and add new varieties,' says David, who has placed red-stemmed cornus in a meadow of *Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold', steel-hued pines, a thoroughly modern blue-tinged bamboo, *Borinda Papyrifera*, and the fantastic but vigorous white bramble, *Rubus biflorus*, among other gems. 'Plant repetition adds value,' he explains. 'Whether it is hamamelis, cornus or taxus, all have a useful part to play, especially in a small- to medium-size garden. If in doubt, repeat.'

In the pale winter sunlight and long, blue shadows, the plants seem imbued with a hypernatural energy. Sparking into life as summer dies, the planting takes a step forward. Subversive and hidden for months, the plants' true colours emerge as they strut their stuff. Finally, they can get this party started □

Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, Ampfield, Romsey, Hampshire is open November–March, 10am–5pm (01794-369318; [www.hilliergardens.org.uk](http://www.hilliergardens.org.uk))