

# *Natural* ORDER

At Melbourne Hall in Derbyshire, autumn is a time of gentle transition, as trees and shrubs take on new colour in a landscape that has little changed since its creation in 1704

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Autumn colours in paintbox shades warm the sweeping landscape at Melbourne Hall.



Robert Vernon has been a great help and mentor to Lady Ralph, supplying such plants as *Tilia japonica* ‘Ernest Wilson’, glowing mustard yellow in autumn, and *Cornus* ‘Venus’, whose leaves, in a good crisp season, become mahogany red. In the borders, the red-burnished leaves of *Aesculus x neglecta* ‘Erythroblastos’ creates a striking combination with the seedheads of *Verbena* and *Echinacea* now toned-down to gentle shades of brown and grey.

Around the large pool, known as the Great Basin, magnificent swamp cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) and pond cypress (*Taxodium ascendens* ‘Nutans’) stand like giant sentinels, marking the changing seasons as they take on autumn shades – pumpkin-brown and fox-red, as if they were colours in an artist’s paintbox.

A closer look at the picture reveals fascinating details of pattern and shape. The intricate tracery of veins can be seen more clearly now on the rich orange-red leaves of *Stewartia rostrata*, while the yellow leaves of the red oak (*Quercus rubra* ‘Aurea’) are edged with a dark brown border that accentuates the characteristic oak leaf shape. There are fruits, too, including those of the handkerchief tree (*Davidia involucreta*) which dangle from the branches like Christmas decorations.

What makes this autumn display particularly special is that it is played out within a garden whose layout has changed little since it was first set out in 1704. It is a rare example of an early 18th-century garden, created by the Right Honourable Thomas Coke, who inherited Melbourne in 1695. Coke travelled widely, and as Lord Chamberlain in the court of Queen Anne he was in an ideal position to observe the work of the top designers and plantsmen. He designed the strongly geometric garden in the manner of French landscape architect, Le Nôtre, and furnished it with examples of the work of the most skilled craftsmen of the day.

The survival of the garden and the craftsmanship it contains is largely due to a downturn in fortune of subsequent owners. As Marie-Claire explains: “Rather luckily, when Capability Brown was doing his great landscaping of gardens there wasn’t any money at Melbourne so it stayed as it was.”

Lucky indeed for today’s visitors, who can still see work by the great sculptor Jan van Nost, including statues of Mercury, Perseus and Andromeda, as well as possibly his greatest piece, the Four Seasons urn, reputedly commissioned by Queen Anne as a gift for her Lord Chamberlain.

The focal point at the back of the Great Basin is the crowning glory of the garden – a wrought iron arbour known as The Bird Cage. It is considered to be the finest example of the work of Robert Bakewell, the most skilled iron worker of his day.

The preservation of the original layout includes maintaining vast hedges of yew and lime as well as

**Above** Glowing leaf colour developing on *Stewartia rostrata*.  
**Left** The Bird Cage is iron worker Robert Bakewell’s crowning glory for the garden.  
**Below** Putti around the fountain, with a statue of Mercury beyond.  
**Below left** Hydrangeas and golden hostas beside the Mill Stream.



**I**N THE GARDENS AT MELBOURNE HALL IN Derbyshire, there is a gentle transition between the seasons. As colours fade from the petals of summer flowers, cool green leaves slowly heat up, until the garden becomes a warm, glowing canvas painted in the rich and mellow shades of autumn.

For almost 30 years the current owners, Lord Ralph Kerr and his wife, Marie-Claire, have been restoring the gardens and, in the process, have greatly increased the collection of trees and shrubs to enhance the autumn show. The tulip tree (*Liriodendron* ‘Chapel Hill’) provides “the most beautiful autumn colour of all,” says Marie-Claire, who, as a professional artist, is developing the garden with a keen eye for colour and form.

Many of the plants have come from nearby Bluebell Arboretum and Nursery, where owner

a long yew tunnel which dates from the very beginning of the garden. It falls to the head gardener, Ian Earl, and his team to carry out the annual clipping of the yew. This takes weeks to complete.

Today the emphasis is on creating new plantings within the original layout. “What we’ve been trying to do is to make it as interesting botanically as it is historically,” Marie-Claire explains. The garden has an arboretum, a bog garden and new mixed borders; an avenue of lime has recently been extended to draw the eye beyond the garden walls to the horizon. For Marie-Claire, the greatest enjoyment has come from creating the borders however, because, as she says, “it is a bit like painting a picture”.

How does it feel to have the care of such an important historical garden in your hands? “It is a funny thing,” she says. “I find it very exciting and very rewarding but as it has improved I have found the responsibility getting greater.” Increasing visitor numbers show that the hard work is certainly being appreciated and, as Marie-Claire concludes: “It really means everything when I see people enjoying



**Above** The Four Seasons urn at the head of the lime avenue.

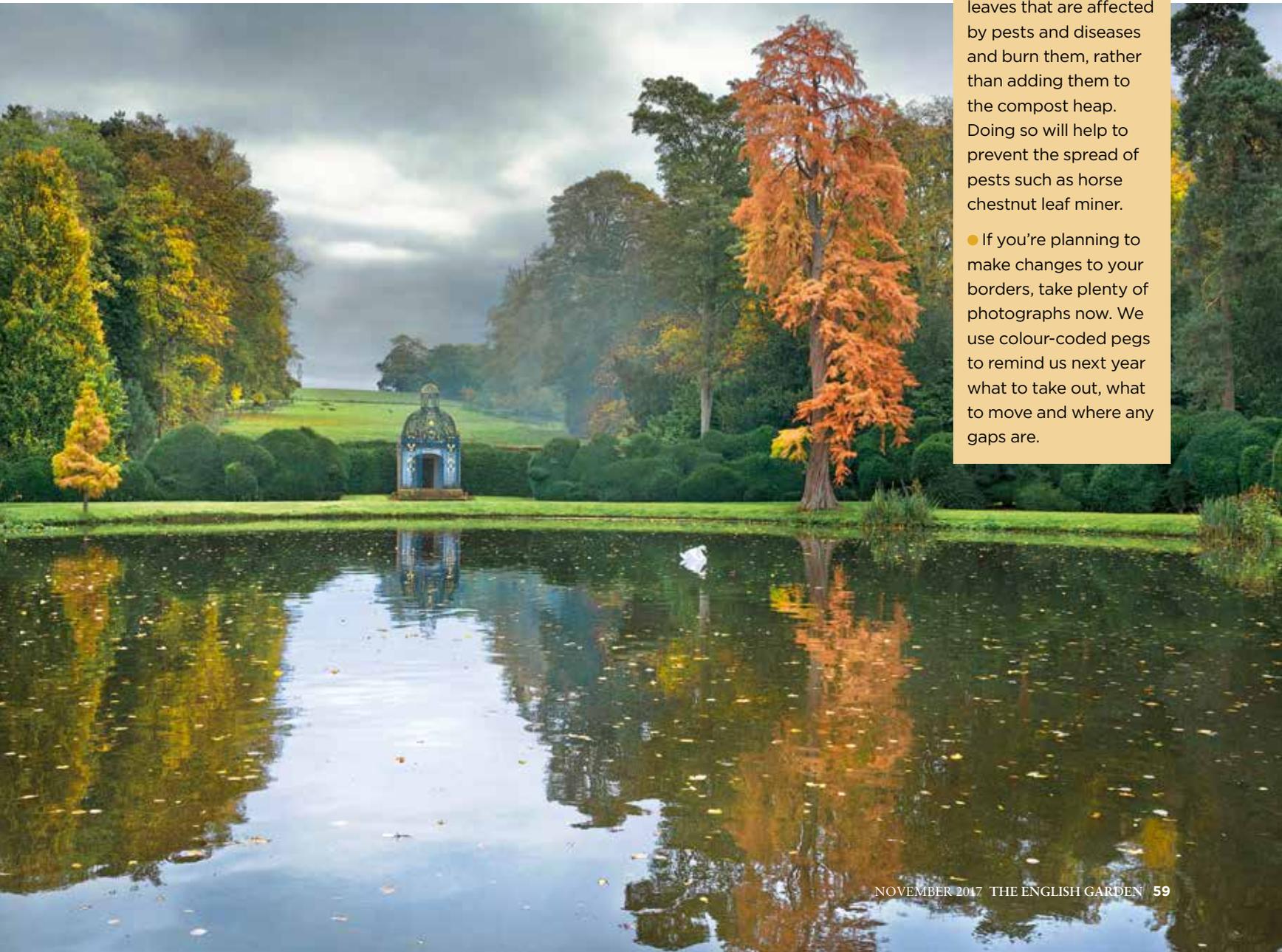
**Below** Perfectly reflected in the still lake: The Bird Cage and fox-coloured *Taxodium distichum*.

## IAN EARL'S SEASONAL IDEAS

- In autumn treat your lawn with a low-nitrogen, high-potash feed to toughen it up for the winter. Regularly clear leaves from the lawn to allow as much sunlight to get to it as possible.

- Gather any fallen leaves that are affected by pests and diseases and burn them, rather than adding them to the compost heap. Doing so will help to prevent the spread of pests such as horse chestnut leaf miner.

- If you're planning to make changes to your borders, take plenty of photographs now. We use colour-coded pegs to remind us next year what to take out, what to move and where any gaps are.





it and taking an interest in what we have been trying to do. Then it makes it all worthwhile.”

The next big project that Lord and Lady Ralph are about to undertake is the creation of a walled rose garden. Although this will be a more modern addition, there will be a link to the original structure in the form of stone steps and benches matching those in the main garden. The entrance will be through an iron gate made to match the panels in The Bird Cage, and in this way past and present will be seamlessly woven together. It is the combination of 18th-century style and 21st-century planting design, brushed by the skilled hand of the painter, that makes the gardens at Melbourne Hall so special. ■

*Melbourne Hall Gardens will be open to visitors by appointment until the end of October. Melbourne Hall, Church Square, Melbourne, Derbyshire DE73 8EN. Tel: 01332 862502; melbournehall.com*

**Top** *Rosa* 'The Pilgrim' clothes a red-brick wall with its late yellow flowers.

**Above** Red-tinged *Aesculus x neglecta* 'Erythroblastos'.

## MELBOURNE HALL NOTEBOOK

Autumn blooms and berries add layered interest



### LILAC LOVELIES

It is easy to overlook autumn-flowering bulbs. The delicate lilac flowers of *Crocus speciosus* contrast well with autumn foliage shades, and, unlike colchicums, they don't have enormous leaves in spring so are easier to place. Grow them in a sunny position with good drainage.



### DOUBLE ACT

Tall and airy stems of *Verbena bonariensis* look their best when planted en masse and paired with plants of contrasting form and colour. At Melbourne Hall, they are partnered with the billowing heads of *Hydrangea* 'Limelight', which develop pink tones as they age.



### ANNUAL LEAF

Northern pin oak (*Quercus ellipsoidalis* 'Hemelrijk') is one of the best large trees for autumn colour, its deeply lobed leaves elegant and shapely. Turning brilliant red in autumn, the leaves tone down to cinnamon shades and remain on the tree well into winter.



### LEADING LIGHT

Michaelmas daisies can justifiably claim to be the top autumn perennials. As the days shorten these amiable daisies add cheer and colour to the borders. *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch' is a reliable favourite, with lavender blue rays surrounding a golden yellow disc.