

IT'S THAT OLD WHITE MAGIC

Snow is a cause for celebration, says **James Alexander-Sinclair**

Snow makes us look at things differently. To have a once-varied landscape smoothed over with the uniformity of a clean white duvet can be both romantic and serene. Ditches are filled in, roofs are blanketed, clutter and litter disappears and all the imperfections of the winter garden – the naked borders, the empty pots and the soggy corpses of faded favourites – are swept away. The air smells of sparkling mineral water; the sky is often virtually cloudless; and an almost monastic hush settles on the countryside.

It is often said that it is easier to tell good gardens from bad when they are covered in snow. All detail is taken away and only the barest bones are visible. Trees and hedges, the lines of walls and paths, the posture of pergolas – all parts of the skeleton of the garden – stand out starkly against a blanket of white, almost as they were when first conceived on the drawing-board. But remember: this particular play has a very short run. Hurry, hurry – there are only a few days, or even hours, until everything returns to mud. This is a good time for assessing outlines, but it is an even better time for just looking.

In the snow, the balance of power shifts as the stars of the winter garden are relegated to minor roles. The evergreens are no longer green, but white. Many of the obvious early-flowering plants, such as snowdrops, hellebores and aconites, are buried. Instead, the day belongs to the supporting cast and backstage staff.

As nothing spectacularly floral is available – unless the snow is

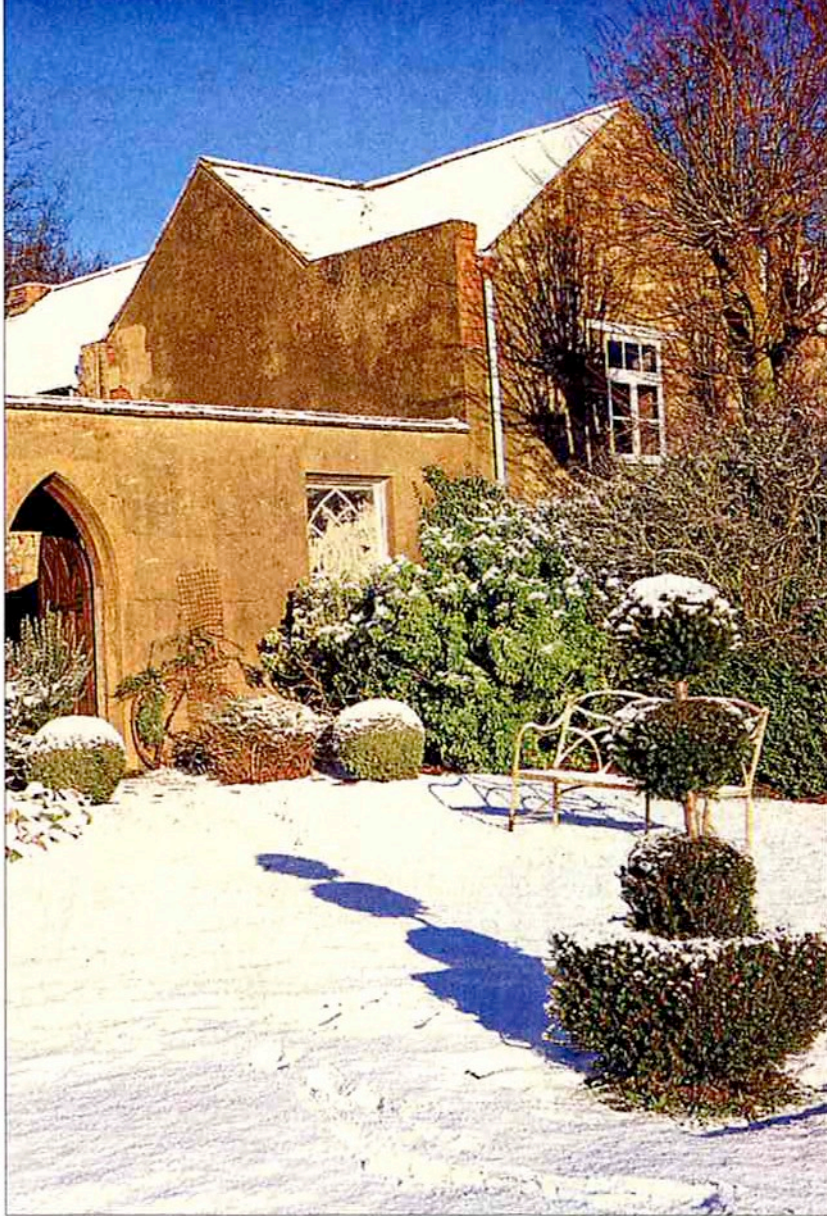
remarkably late and catches camellias in bloom – what catches the eye are the tiny flowers of trees and shrubs: the minute blossoms of *Parrotia persica*, coloured like sea anemones; the fluffy yellow clusters on *Cornus kousa*; the first hazel catkins. All can usually be relied upon to perform at exactly the time when snow comes.

Some plants were born for particular seasons: daffodils for spring, roses for high summer, grasses for frosty autumn mornings. Topiary is at its very best in snow. Clipped yew or box is always a pleasure, its polite geometric shapes contrasting with herbaceous borders or harmonising with neatly striped lawns. When the first flakes fall, this unassuming chorus line steps forward, topped with a teetering burden of snow that is somehow comical but still dignified. I defy any warm-blooded person to be unmoved by the sight of box balls dressed as Christmas puddings, or hedges like sugar-dusted dragons' backs.

Even more exciting are those things that are usually ignored. For the vast majority of the year, the dark hawthorn hedges between fields are just background, but when the blizzards blow in, their stems gather little clusters of snowflakes and the interlaced branches cast striking shadows as the watery sun dips low. Dreary winter woodlands are spectacularly transformed by soaring trunks sprayed with wind-blown dustings of white and by sparkling arches built from weighted branches.

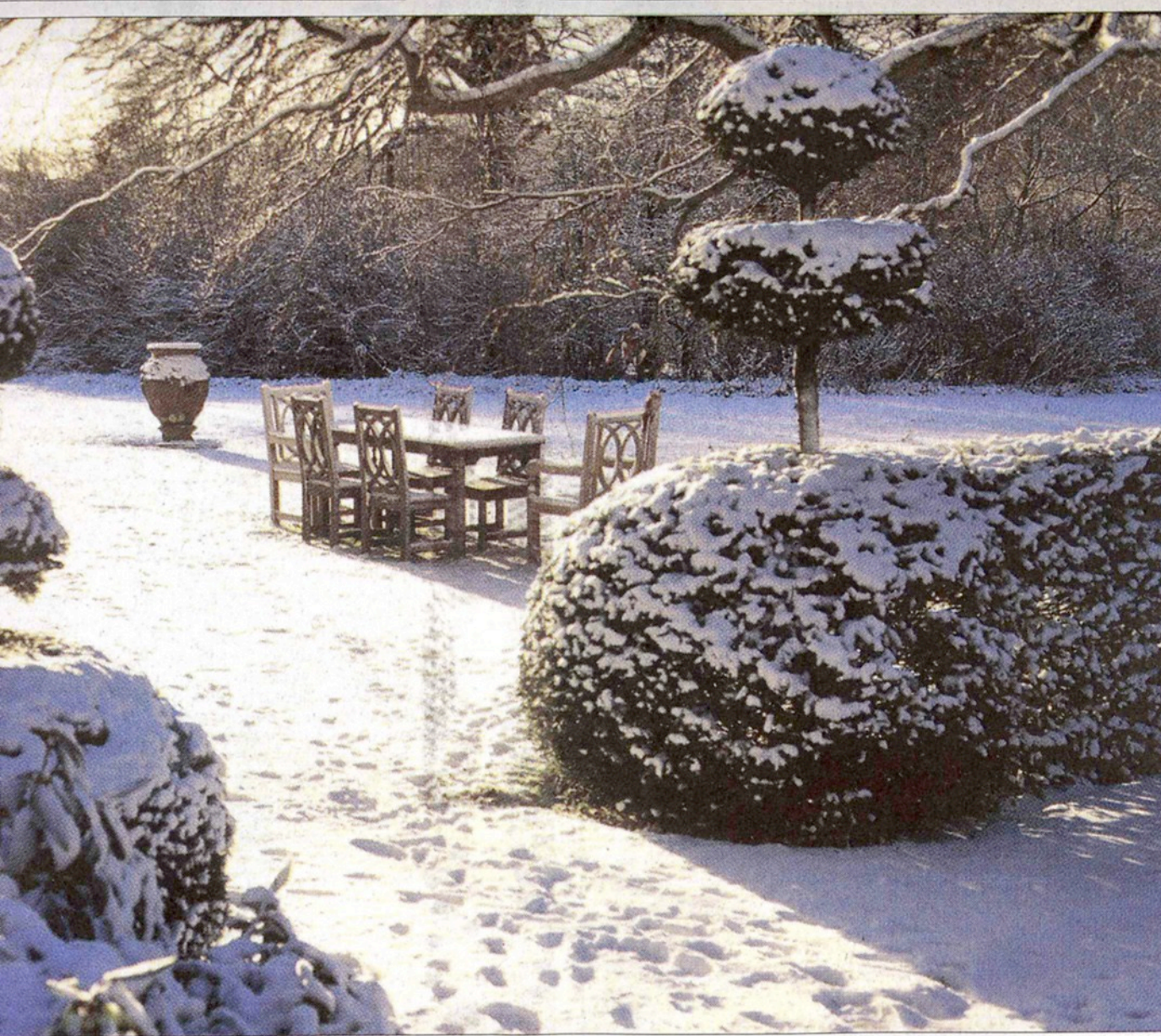
There is an ash tree in the woods near here that is totally unremarkable; but in snow, its bark is transformed into a greenish snakeskin of colour and shadow, and the raised lines of snow on its branches look like aerial pathways winding off mysteriously into the distance.

Look even closer and little details leap out. Ideally, the day will have



begun with an almost eerie glow and a fiery sunrise sending streaks of pink, orange, violet and red across the horizon. This is followed by deep blue alpine skies and an intense, all-pervading light that is reflected by the snow to show the most humble and uninteresting features in a totally new guise: brick walls glow deep red, barbed-wire fences are transformed into sparkling necklaces, rose thorns become silvery needles, gateposts wear little party hats of snow, the banks of iced-over ponds become invisible and the progress of even the





Winter wonderland: snow emphasises the structural elements of Alexander-Sinclair's Northamptonshire garden, from topiary to *sisyrinchium* foliage (bottom left), and from the skeletal leaves of *Hydrangea quercifolia* (bottom right) to dried perennials surrounding a trellis (far right)



smallest animal or bird is marked by perfect footsteps.

From a practical point of view, snow can be terribly inconvenient: slippery roads, cancelled trains, everything grinding to a halt. Even in gardens it can be a bore, since delicate shrubs must have the snow shaken from their branches (snow can be surprisingly heavy and can damage even quite large trees) and icy paths must be shovelled clear. But apart from these few activities, on a snowy day there is not that much to do except to use your eyes.

Get out there and enjoy the whole ritual of extra socks, boots, gloves and seldom-used furry hats; the search through sheds for toboggans; even the excruciating cold of a snowball sliding down the neck of your shirt. Relish the squeaky crunching of each footfall and the taste of snowflakes on your tongue. Ignore practical considerations and celebrate the difference; this is, thank goodness, not a country where the snow stays for months and months. It is only a fleeting visit. Revel in its beauty today, for tomorrow it will all be slush.