

Lovely bones

Like a star from the golden age of Hollywood, if your garden has the perfect structure, it will weather even the cruellest months

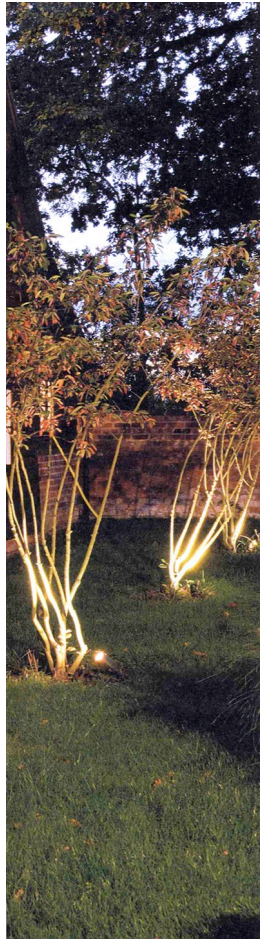
REPORT JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

In winter, gardens have two choices: either to hibernate or to adapt. Hibernation is easy: don't look out of the window during daylight hours between the beginning of December and early March. Adapting involves more imagination. For those of you with large gardens, things are relatively straightforward because you can engineer a "having your cake and eating it" situation, in that you have enough space for both winter and summer gardens. However, if like most people in this country you are a bit short on rolling acres, then the fallow months require creative thought.

It is encouraging that the barrenness of winter lasts for a remarkably short time, even though the long nights make it seem like an eternity. The most important hours in any garden are the ones when you are out there enjoying it, whether gardening or lolling about. This is usually between March and November and it is relatively easy to make the garden sing during that time (beginning with early bulbs and ending with the latest of late perennials). Once you realise that the remaining months are minimalist, life becomes a bit easier. We cannot expect the same full-on impact that we get from the trumpeting of herbaceous borders or the soothing chirrups of pastel-coloured rose gardens – winter is about keeping things very, very simple. There is no room for clutter at times when the greatest pleasures can be had from a flash of sunlight, a frosty morning or a clear blue sky.

The most beautiful people retain their looks into a ripe old age because they have a perfectly proportioned bone structure – look at an 80-year-old Marlene Dietrich or Cary Grant. Gardens are the same. In the winter we cannot rely on colour and buzzing bees; instead everything has to count. We have all seen divine >>





Clockwise from above: winter garden accessories, like this urn, should be beautiful rather than functional; punching above its weight, the tiny Daphne shows; subtle uplighting can transform trees at night



THE BONES OF YOUR GARDEN SHOULD BE LIKE AUDREY HEPBURN'S

photographs of country houses with vast snow-custed yew hedges and expanses of frosty lawns; it may not be possible to replicate such magnificence but we can get close. For a start, take into consideration the things that most gardens have: a paved area, a lawn, maybe a path, fences and a tree (if you haven't, plant one immediately). These are the bones of our gardens and if they are not strong enough, then the whole design will collapse in upon itself.

A terrace (or patio) is a place to sit in summer but at this time of year it is just a bit of paving. It does not have to be. The simple expedient of playing around with the paving materials (mix in some brick and, even, timber among the stone) makes it much more exciting, in the same way that a Persian rug is more interesting than a plain piece of shagpile. The most alluring paths are those that either lead the eye to a distinct focal point or swerve mysteriously just out of sight. Fences or walls, if built well and given an occasional imaginative twiddle, can draw the attention much more in winter than at any other time of the year.

The tree is the *pièce de résistance*. By day it will be a dark tracery of interlacing branches, but by night it can be magically transformed with some subtle lighting. If you have a large tree, then a technique called "moonlighting" is even more effective. To do this, fix lights high up the tree and let the light shine down to give a warm wash to the trunk – particularly wonderful if your tree has distinctive bark (Scots pines, birches and knobly oaks, for example).

Aside from the major structural elements,

Go for scent over size – *Lonicera fragrantissima* is a good choice

there are the accessories. Most important of these is furniture. It is very important that your garden seating and tables are beautiful. This is for the very simple reason that, given our weather, you are going to spend much more time looking at chairs than sitting on them. Even a couple of logs will look better than something picked up cheaply at a garage off the A1. The same can be said for urns and pots – they do not even have to have anything growing in them but they should be an interesting shape.

Lastly, never ignore the front garden. To many people, the front garden is just an accessway and a place to store the bins. Often, however, it is overlooked from upstairs windows and can be a perfect place for a small knot garden. This is a simple (or fiendishly complicated if you prefer) pattern of low box hedges: easy to make, simple to maintain and infinitely preferable to a bit of skanky lawn.

All this is very well, but the main reason most of us garden is to grow stuff. There are a number of indispensable winter flowering plants, but not because they are brightly coloured; in fact quite the opposite. Apart from winter-flowering pansies (about which the least said the better), many of the best off-season flowers are very small but punch way above their weight, not just because of their rarity but also for their scent. For example, *Lonicera fragrantissima* (a shrubby honeysuckle with tiny, sweet-scented white flowers), waxy-flowered *Chimonanthus praecox* or the tiny pink bugles of *Daphne bholua*. But the very best, I think, is *Sarcococca hookeriana*, which has purply stems and enough fragrance to pervade an entire garden. Never make the mistake of planting any of these too far away – you want to be able to get a blast of scent wherever you go.

Gardens are not tortoises. You cannot pack them in straw and put them in the shed until spring. True, there is not so much going on but they can still dazzle. Keep it simple and make sure the bones of your garden are more like Audrey Hepburn's than Bernard Manning's. ■