

A fall of snow emphasizes the formal elements of Deirdre Fenwick's garden at Sholebroke Lodge (all pictures). The white-covered, mown-grass parterre creates a crisscross pattern immediately in front of the house (top and below centre), while clipped evergreen shrubs and carefully placed pots (below left) add structural interest. Deciduous shrubs contribute to the garden in winter, too – the scarlet berries of ?What (below right), for example, gleam beneath a covering a snow



ICED FANCIES

Good structure underpins these two adjacent gardens which, when they are unclothed in winter, reveal a new delicacy in the contrasting forms of clipped evergreens, skeletal deciduous plants, grasses and intriguing and seed heads – iced with snow

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Adjoining the garden of Sholebroke Lodge is James Alexander-Sinclair's garden (all pictures), which relies on small deciduous trees, rather than evergreens, to enliven the winter scene. The russet leaves of 12 beech pillars, for example, contribute colour (top). Elsewhere, grasses and the seed heads of perennials are retained for their interesting forms, including (bottom, from left): *Xxxxxxxx*, valuable for its scarlet flowers; fans of bright green *Xxxxxxxx*; *Papaver* which, useful for its seed pods; tussocks of *Xxxxxxxx*; *Xxxxxxxx*, with its delicate inflorescences; frost-blackened *Achillea* which; and straw-coloured *Xxxxxxxx*



There is something magical about a garden blanketed in snow. On one of those rare winter days when a good covering of crisp snow is set against a clear blue sky, the garden is transformed into a relief map of hummocks and rills, the spidery skeletons of plants and trees outlined and accentuated by silvery white. Winter is never a low point for garden designer James Alexander-Sinclair, whose gardens are designed with each season in mind. 'We're working in a crescendo towards only two or three days in winter when the garden is under snow,' he says. 'It's such a short period, but good winter structure is always at the back of my mind when I'm designing and planting.'

In his own Northamptonshire garden, this structure comes not from evergreens, as one might expect, but from grasses, seed heads and small deciduous trees – as well as a good network of paths that in summer are hidden, engulfed by plants. 'It's not worth sacrificing a

large part of the garden to evergreens because for most of the year they just sit there, green and dense. It is perennials that can really make the garden sing.' One of the most striking features in James's garden is a stand of 12 beech pillars, arranged in an irregularly spaced pattern on the lawn below the house. 'Clipped beech keeps its leaves, of course, so it has all the advantages of an evergreen, but because it changes colour through the year, it's far more interesting.'

James leaves as many seed heads as possible in the garden during the winter months, although he advises against simply leaving everything. 'As soon as things start looking messy, I take them down, and just leave the plants that are doing best.' The key to an interesting visual spread in winter, he suggests, is to ensure a variety of different-shaped seed heads, from the pompon stalks of phlomis to buttons of rudbeckia and domes of fennel and achillea. 'Looking at the different shapes in the skeleton is important, because you notice different

things in winter,' he points out. Grasses are also invaluable, especially *Calamagrostis* x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', which recurs throughout James's garden – 'It's very rigid and takes the weather well.' *Miscanthus* seed heads are also useful, and so, too, is *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Windspiel': its straw-coloured flower heads remain intact for several months.

Adjoining James's half-acre plot is the garden of Sholebroke Lodge, which belongs to his mother-in-law, Deirdre Fenwick. Linked by a narrow path (well used over the years by James's children, who come and go between the two gardens), this is an entirely different garden, much older, and spanning five acres. It is more traditional, with mature trees, banks of shrubs, and a grass *tapis vert* that unfolds in front of the house, giving an uninterrupted view over the fields beyond. In the snow and frost, this mown-grass parterre looks enchanting, its crisscross pattern highlighted in light and shadow. At

Sholebroke, because of the size of the garden, evergreen structure is more necessary than in James's smaller plot, and it appears near the house in the form of clipped yew cones. The symmetry of the yew contrasts with the wilder shrubs in the further reaches of the garden, which have been allowed to grow, unrestrained, to their full size. Euonymus and *Viburnum* x *bodnantense* provide winter interest, while the trees tower above, forming a canopy to catch the snow.

In their different ways, these two gardens neatly exemplify James's design philosophy. 'Contrast is essential,' he sums up. 'Every garden should have a mixture of things that are hard, tight and clipped, and those that are a wilder. It should have a bit of discipline – but not too much.' And, of course, because contrasting shapes are so important in winter, when the garden is unclothed, these two gardens embrace the season rather than hiding in shame beneath the snow □

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