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A WINTER'S TALE

The contrast between the formal planting of the garden and the naturalistic parkland at Michael Hoffman's Gloucestershire home comes into its own during the colder months

WORDS CAROLINE BECK | PHOTOGRAPHS ALLAN POLLOK-MORRIS



Winter in the northern hemisphere can stifle the enthusiasm of all but the most optimistic of gardeners. In these short, dusky days, our gardens are deep in hibernation and can feel rather flat. However, it does not have to be like this. If you plant with the cooler months in mind, then a garden can be as striking in winter as it is at other times of year.

At Little Barrow in Gloucestershire, the garden of American Michael Hoffman and his wife Mercedes, the planting is deliberately pared down to the minimum

and the element that most captures the eye is its structure. The garden around the house is formal, with clipped hedges and trees, and offers views out towards the more naturalistic parkland of the stream-fed lake and fields. The contrast between the two, without the visual distraction of summer planting, gives the winter garden a quiet, contemplative feel.

This enticing effect begins at the front of the house with a stand of graceful multi-stemmed *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* (Himalayan birch), their chalky white bark reflecting any available light. At the back of the house, the Italian Garden,



The back of the house overlooks a dramatic avenue of clipped hornbeam cones planted within box bases.



THIS PICTURE This close-set planting of Scots pine creates a brooding, atmospheric scene.

ABOVE RIGHT A bronze statue of Shakespeare's Juliet by sculptor and former ballet dancer Tom Merrifield (tommerrifield.net) takes centre stage in the Formal Garden.

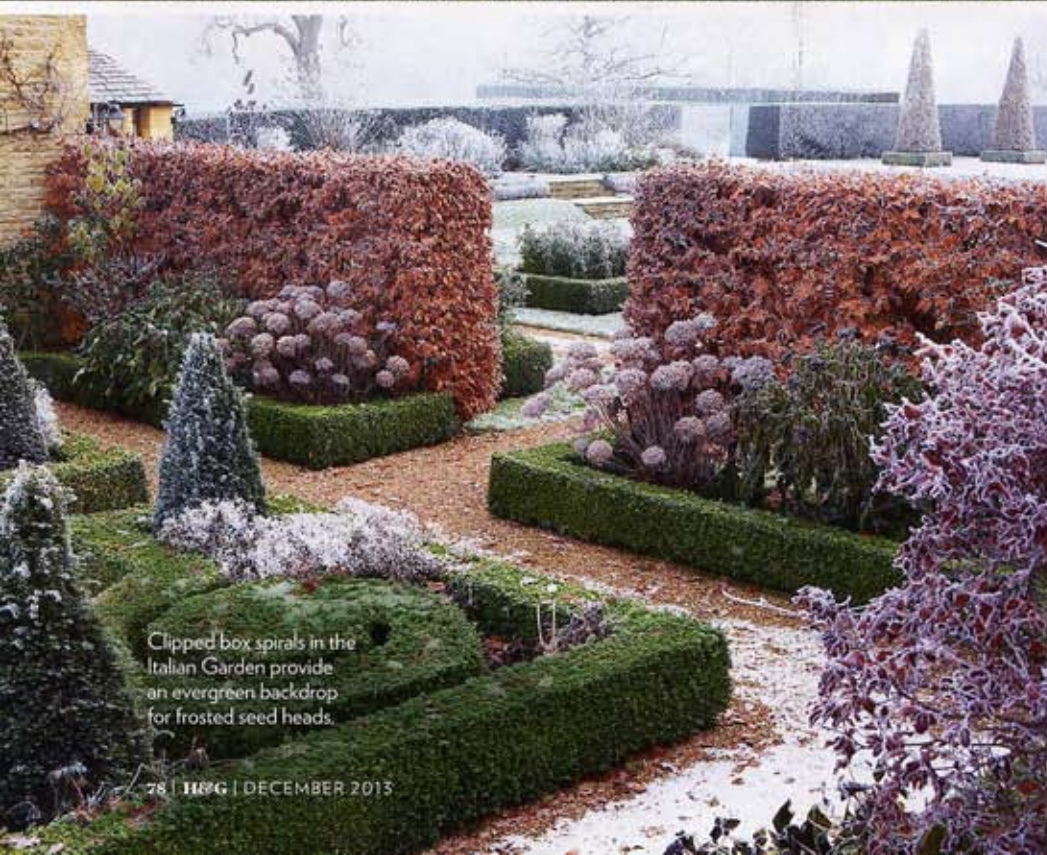


which was originally a car park, is classically proportioned, with clipped box spirals surrounded by a beech hedge that both contains and reveals the wider landscape. In winter, gazing down onto this area from the main bedrooms that overlook it is a delight, Michael says.

The layout is a design typically used by Tim Rees, the garden's designer, who says he likes to plan areas that are each self-contained, but which also lead the eye and the imagination to what is beyond. "This garden is simply planted, but in itself, is not simple," he says. "Each part looks out to a specific set of revealed landscapes, over hedges, through gaps and between the bare branches of trees."

At the back of the house lies a sunken lawn that, in frost or snow, is threaded with the tracks of rabbits and foxes. The lawn was there when Michael bought the run-down Georgian property in 1999, but the low stone wall that surrounded it has since been replaced by an earth bank that simultaneously separates and gives the lawn a visual connection with the rest of the garden.

Fourteen narrow cones of clipped hornbeam planted within squares of evergreen box break up the flatness of the view and during the winter months, the leafless branches give the appearance of having been cast by a blacksmith. "We chose to plant hornbeam because the ground can become quite waterlogged,



Clipped box spirals in the Italian Garden provide an evergreen backdrop for frosted seed heads.



Rosa 'Lady Hillingdon' planted within the squares of box are deliberately left for their interesting form, rather than being cut back in the autumn.