

Banks of frosted grasses combine with the icy lake for an atmospheric winter scene.

Wild at HEART

In the rolling grounds of Pensthorpe, Piet Oudolf's textured and colourful Millennium Garden sits alongside a naturalistic complex of islands and lakes filled with all manner of waterfowl

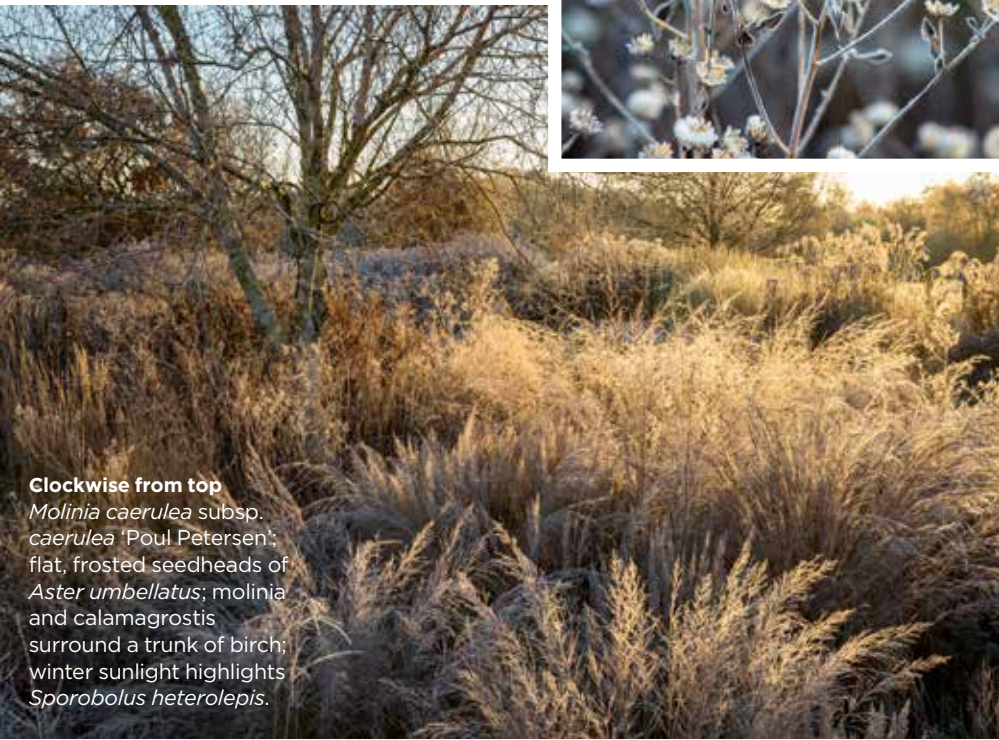
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From the gazebo, all the visitor can see is plants, hiding the pathways and obscuring the water.

THERE ARE SOME DAYS THAT ARE unforgettable. A romantic sunset. A lazy picnic. The day a child is born. A winning cup final. The perfect birthday. Or a wave that breaks in just the right place. As you can see from this set of pictures, at Pensthorpe we have all the elements of horticultural winter ecstasy coming together in exactly the same place at exactly the right time. From the deep winter chill rises something glorious, fuelled by sunshine, clear air and a truly delicious frost. Overnight, a garden that seemed past its best is suddenly given a second wind: grasses that yesterday looked a bit beige and exhausted are now wands of frost-rimed magic, while the fading seedheads of summer flowers are crowned with tiaras of ice. This moment will not last. In a few hours the sun will have warmed the air and the frost will have lost its lustre: *carpe diem* people; *carpe diem*.

This is the Millennium Garden at Pensthorpe. It was planted in 1999 by Piet Oudolf, the internationally famous Dutch garden designer and plantmeister. However, to understand its existence we must go back 30 years to the early 1970s when the site was owned by a gentleman called Bill Makins. At that time it consisted of fields bisected by the old Fakenham railway line but, in 1974, Mr Makins set about removing around a million tonnes of gravel from the site. This sort of operation usually leaves deep scars on the landscape for many years after the excavations have finished, but, in this case, islands were built and the banks planted to encourage wildlife in one of the earliest examples of ecological planting. Unsurprisingly



Clockwise from top
Molinia caerulea subsp. *caerulea* 'Poul Petersen'; flat, frosted seedheads of *Aster umbellatus*; *Molinia* and *calamagrostis* surround a trunk of birch; winter sunlight highlights *Sporobolus heterolepis*.

these newly created ponds proved welcoming to passing wildfowl and, such is the irresistible charm of a duck,

the site soon became a thriving nature reserve and home to flocks of birds. Mr Makins travelled to breeders far and wide and soon there were tufted ducks, longtails, wigeon, harlequins, goldeneye and teal.

Visitors swiftly followed: twitchers, naturalists (Pensthorpe hosted *BBC Springwatch* from 2008 to 2010) and small children eager to feed the ducks. Where there are people there should also be a garden, so Bill Makins went on the hunt for Piet Oudolf who, at that time, was not nearly as famous as he is now and had done only a couple of gardens outside the Netherlands. At first he was reluctant, but the deal was finally sealed in a phone call on Christmas Day.

The Millennium Garden is a sea of glorious perennials that sweep elegantly down a slope towards one of the many lakes. There is a network of paths that lead you through the plantings and across the water to a small island, but the best thing is that you cannot see those paths until you're walking them. You can stand in the shelter of a small gazebo and all you will see are plants. There are birches and stands of tall shrubs that lead on to swathes of shimmering grasses – miscanthus, molinias, stipa, sporobolus and another 18 different species – interspersed with wedges of perennial colour – eupatorium, asters, agastaches, salvias, echinaceas and many, many more. They curve and billow all around you, swooping down to meet the towering Norfolk reeds on the waterside and, from there, the eye surfs across lily pads under the droop of willow and off towards the river. It is, of course, designed to be full of zing and pep throughout the summer but, as you can see from these photographs, it does not end there.

No longer are these just dying stems fading away towards the mush of winter; they are suddenly elevated to sparkling starlets. It is as if the lights snap on, the music starts, the sequins shake down from the ceiling and the show begins. There was a time, not all that long ago, when gardeners eagerly cut back everything in what was called the autumn clean-up. Seedheads were severed, grasses guillotined and leaves lopped. We were left with expanses of empty brown ground that stayed that way until the springtime; undoubtedly very tidy but also completely soulless. Looking at this garden that seems completely sacrilegious – hands up who would prefer hoovered neatness to this? Precisely.

In 2003 Mr Makins handed over responsibility to Bill and Deb Jordan who have added to the site. There is a new Wave Garden designed by Julie Toll, playgrounds on an epic scale and more wildfowl. One of the Jordans' schemes was to engineer a replanting of the Millennium Garden in 2008 to take into consideration the changing conditions as trees grew and cast more shade, and also because every garden needs a kick sometimes: nature never stays still and neither do gardens. The garden is

Right *Eurybia x herveyi* and *Persicaria alpina* go well together even in their winter guise.



Pensthorpe's BEST SEEDHEADS

Some plants excel at standing proud in a frost. These ones all hold their heads up high



ASTILBE

Beacons of brightness in summer, with plumes of frosted fluff in winter, astilbes grow best in moist soil.



ERYNGIUM BOURGATHI

Very spiky and sculptural – like good gin, they are even better with a bit of ice.



ECHINACEA

Pensthorpe mix white and pink coneflower varieties for extra longevity. Both look wonderful glazed with frost.



CALAMAGROSTIS BRACHYTRICHA

A really good grass for a sunny spot, with greyish-pink feathery flowers.



now run by Jonathan Pearce with the help of one other gardener and a bevy of volunteers. His job is twofold – to preserve the Oudolf garden, while extending the gardens in his own style: it is a nice mixture of curation and creation. Jonathan has put in new bridges, which have brought an entire island into the garden. “I always took photographers over there,” he explains, “because it gave the best view back to the garden. It seemed right to make it easier to access.” He has taken the spirit of the Millennium Garden and reinterpreted it in his own way using divisions from the original plants.

So the burning question is: when *can* you cut down all this bejewelled frostiness, for it cannot stay forever? Jonathan and team attack it in January once everything is starting to look limp and tired – as do we all by new year. There used to be compost heaps for the large piles of prunings, but Jonathan has incorporated that area into the garden and has come up with a simpler solution. All plants are cut down to the ground in small bites and the clippings are left as a mulch to quietly rot back into the soil.

Gardening in a nature reserve has revealed interesting pest problems. “We have trouble from the greylag and barnacle geese as they love bulbs and happily eat plants,” explains Bill. “They tend to eat the things that the muntjac and voles ignore!”

Pensthorpe is always worth a visit:
through the *zingy colour* of high summer
into the *mellow plumpness* of autumn



Top Textured solidago, asters and eupatorium with *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Malepartus’.

Above *Kalimeris incisa* with golden *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* ‘Edith Dudsus’.

As a solution, the Jordans have tried to subtly fence in the garden. That aside, an advantage of living in a wildfowl park is that there are no slug or snail problems: if any mollusc dares raise its head, there is usually a duck on hand to sort it out.

Pensthorpe is always worth a visit: from the spring when the first green shoots show their heads, through the zingy colour of high summer and into the mellow plumpness of autumn. But we must remember that it doesn’t stop there and we occasionally get days like this: days when we need to be spontaneous. Crisp, cold days like this seldom announce their coming, so jump in the car, grab a woolly hat and get outside to feast upon the frost. ■

Pensthorpe Natural Park, Pensthorpe, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 0LN. Open all year round, except Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day, from 10am. Tel: 01328 851465; pensthorpe.com