

Second SPRING

Don't think of autumn as the beginning of the end; take a leaf out of Albert Camus' book and see it as a fresh start. And there's no better place to do that than at RHS Wisley

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS



The lake and pagoda come alive with red *Liquidambar* 'Wisley King', rusty *Taxodium distichum*, dogwoods and rubus.



*Frost crackles on the grass
and light the texture of tonic
water trickles through trees*



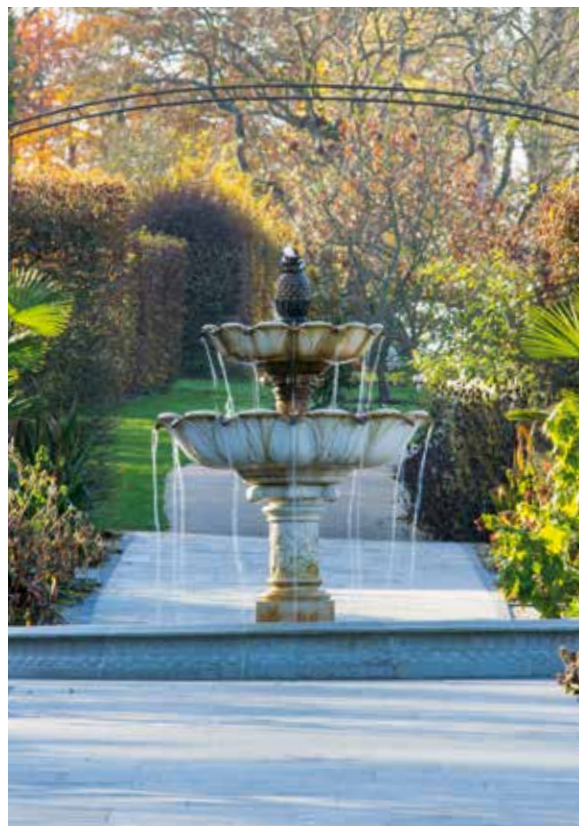
Top Vibrant acer foliage can be spotted from afar.
Above Part of Wisley's conifer collection, *Abies pinsapo* 'Glauca'.
This image Clipped beech and autumn seedheads.
Right The Exotic Garden's classical fountain.

Albert Camus is not a chap to whom one usually turns for garden writing. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, but most of his stuff had nothing to do with horticulture.

Anarcho-syndicalism and absurdism, yes, but if you are looking for garden tips you are probably better off with the works of Mr Titchmarsh. However, he did contribute a very neat little quote about this time of year: "Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower" – a rather wonderful way to look at the setting of the seasons as we slide elegantly from the loucheness of late summer into the chill of winter.

Every season conjures up deep seated memories in all of us. Winter is about Christmas, spring is chock full of skipping lambs and fields of daffodils, and summer is a time of lazy picnics and the feeling of grass on the backs of bare legs. Autumn is equally evocative: I cannot get away from fallen leaves painstakingly raked into piles for composting or burning. Even today (when I really should know better) I find myself twitching whenever I am confronted with one of these as I want to fling myself into the middle of it, to roll around and, ideally, to hide underneath the leaves in order to leap from the heap to startle small children. Maybe that is just me but, unless there has been a massive change of policy, it is definitely not the sort of behaviour I would encourage you to indulge in when at the RHS flagship garden at Wisley in Surrey.

This fabulous garden will introduce you to the more sophisticated glories of autumn – although I am pretty sure they won't mind if you do a bit of leaf kicking. You will find yourself distracted by things every step of the way but I would urge you to go



straight to the glasshouse garden when you arrive – try not to be sidetracked by the alarmingly tempting shop and the resplendence of the new arrival building (surrounded with a new garden designed by Christopher Bradley-Hole). This is because I want to draw your attention to the many attractions of beech.

About 12 years ago Tom Stuart-Smith designed a landscape of clipped columns and sweeping hedges that encircle the glasshouse and the lake. Right now the low light sparkles on the trees and the autumn breezes rustle through the fading seedheads of the herbaceous plants and lagoons of fluffy-maned grasses. It is a sight that should not be missed, especially on a perfect sunny morning with a crackling of frost on the grass and light the texture of tonic water trickling through the trees.

When learned horticulturists write about trees for autumn colour they wax lyrical about acers and amelanchiers, but one should never forget good old-fashioned *Fagus sylvatica*. It is one of those multi-purpose plants that can lend itself to being hedge or topiary as easily as a towering forest giant. In every manifestation beech trees are glorious, especially at this time of year when they take on the persona of a nutty flapjack with dabs of brown, beige and pistachio green in among their ageing foliage.

Above Tom Stuart-Smith's clipped beech columns bring smart, regimented structure to *Miscanthus* 'Starlight' and *Prunus* 'Shizuka'.

That should be enough poetry for one day but I know that some of you will be wanting more: you will have a picture of autumn in your heads that is more inflammatory. You will want to see leaves the colour of freshly spilled blood and crashing orange foliage that will remind you of bonfires and barrels of polished satsumas. Wisley can do that too: there are glorious acers scattered through the gardens.

You can spot them from a long way away as they rear their scarlet heads over the duller fading foliage of shrubs and herbaceous plants. They are the irresistible divas of autumn but there are other trees that are just as sparky: the common old cherry for example. Lovely blossom in the spring but, between you and I, pretty dull during the summer. This month, like the Ugly Duckling, it suddenly springs to life again with a veritable fruit salad of bright colours shimmering through its branches. And, because I am a considerate kind of chap, I would very much like to take this opportunity to share my favourite tree with you: a tree before whose trunk I can stand for ages in awed silence. I juggle my diary every year so I can make at least one pilgrimage to pay homage to its magnificence. I have nearly reached the point when I leave burnt offerings at its base. It is a liquidambar of spectacular proportions: *L. styraciflua* 'Wisley King' to give it its full title.



Above Fiery *Prunus* 'Shōgetsu' joins the beech columns around Wisley's glasshouse.

Left The autumn foliage of *Liquidambar* 'Wisley King' is unsurpassed.

Below Fluffy pennisetum teams with dogwoods' buttery autumn leaves.

It's a truly magnificent sight at any time of year, but this is the moment when it outshines every other plant in the gardens.

Nearby is the pond around which the stems of dogwoods and willows glow with fiery reds and oranges. They have the march on many autumn treasures in that they are in it for the long haul and will glow until spring. Here too you will come across the taxodium, or swamp cypress. These may not be everybody's go-to tree for autumn but they have, in addition to those sculptural knuckled roots, foliage that has turned from soft green to a caramel yellow for this season. It is a deciduous conifer, like the larch, which is unusual. On the (sometimes unjustly) unfashionable subject of conifers we must remember that not every tree at Wisley is dropping leaves all over the place. There are plenty of fine, sculptural evergreens that stand out among the naked stems. Many people dismiss conifers as a genre; this is unfair as there is a richness of colour and form to be appreciated. Glaucous blue abies, speckled cypress and golden pines abound.

Dogwoods and willows are in it for the long haul and will glow until spring





Above Winter crops include 'Redbor' kale and celeriac 'Monarch'.
Left Scarlet *Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood'.

ACERS *for autumn*

Six garden-worthy Japanese maples that shine in this season, selected by James

***Acer palmatum* 'Dissectum'**

Leaves as finely cut as a lace shawl that turn beautifully. It can be grown in a pot but make sure it has enough water.

Acer campestre

The field maple is usually a hedgerow tree but it has wonderful butter-yellow autumn foliage. Perfect for a wild corner.

***Acer palmatum* 'Ōsakazuki'**

A real showstopper. It's a little understated in summer, but zings in this season. Best positioned in partial shade.

***Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood'**

The best for dark red. Its purple-tinged spring and summer leaves go pillar-box red in autumn.

***Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku'**

Young leaves are a shrimpy-pink, turning green and then bright yellow. In addition the bark is a striking coral red, which stands out particularly well in winter.

Acer griseum

Another one with good bark, this time cinnamon coloured and slightly peeling. It's slow to come into leaf in spring so don't panic!

It may be that your dander is left unmoved by all this fiery amazingness and you are the sort of cove who prefers a vegetable. Most of our kitchen gardens are looking a bit bleak at this time of year – the courgette glut is a distant memory and the last carrots long since julienned. Not at Wisley: here the model vegetable garden is bustling with winter salads, kohlrabi and kale, all laid out in rows as perfectly neat as a line of guardsmen at the Queen's Birthday. A little rest from the visual onslaught of autumn and definitely worth a short diversion on your way to a slice of cake, without which no visit to an RHS garden is complete.

Wisley is an extraordinarily inspiring place. It may be a bit sprawly in its design but the plantsmanship is always stupendous. The staff there, led by the sickeningly young and dynamic curator, Matt Pottage, are unafraid to try out different things: if you don't believe me then go and take a walk through the new heather garden or look at the plantings around the laboratory buildings. For them autumn is not just a season but another opportunity to do something special. You don't need to be a knowledgeable gardener to enjoy autumn at Wisley, you just need sensible shoes and a heart that sings with the romanticism of the season. ■

RHS Garden Wisley, Wisley Lane, Wisley, Woking, Surrey GU23 6QB. Open every day of the year except 21 December to 1 January inclusive.
 Tel: 01483 224234; rhs.org.uk/wisley