



Swans in their winter plumage

At a time of year when only dormant plants cover pergolas and arches, a layer of snow, kissed by warm, low winter light, adds beauty to the gardens at Felley Priory. Crisp, geometric stepped yew pyramids here contrast with the rounded shapes of the swans that top them.

Seasoned with a sprinkling of snow

Felley Priory in Nottinghamshire, an RHS Partner Garden, is full of topiary given extra definition and an ethereal enchantment in the right winter weather

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Sheltering embrace

Vital for shelter on what is an exposed site, the yew hedges were among the first plantings when the garden was laid out in the 1970s. Now, immaculate scallops alternate with clipped spheres, in complete contrast to the rounded, natural outlines of the trees beyond the hedge.



Focus on topiary

Topiaried yew creates abstract, geometric and organic shapes in different parts of the garden. A touch of whimsy is never far away, however, with topiary swans (left) and peacocks, crowns, castles and spheres. A dusting of snow only serves to emphasise the architectural elegance of the pristine topiary.



Roses frozen in time

Pink-flowered shrub *Rosa Bonica* ('Meidomonac') AGM (above left) and a bud of *R. 'Deep Secret'* (above) bring precious splashes of colour to the garden as late as Christmastime.



Layered yew

Yew is evergreen, responds well to regular trimming and buds grow from old wood, so is ideal for topiary. Precise clipping here has created an elegant, three-layered square 'pagoda' topped with a pyramid. »

I have a friend who was brought up in Ukraine where they have a lot of snow for a prolonged period of time. As a result she regards snow with the sort of deep and vicious loathing that most of us reserve for snakes or politicians. No matter how beautiful it may seem to me, she is always left unmoved and, well, cold. This is a classic example of familiarity breeding deep contempt. For most of us Brits, however, snow is still rare enough to enchant and captivate, at least when viewed from the comfort of our homes.

Of course, the best places for appreciating snow are our gardens. We can all, young or old, recognise the thrill of waking up and throwing open the curtains to be confronted with a layer of fresh snow across the garden. Even the dulllest tree is transformed instantly into something enchanting, and hedges become ribbons of crystalline icing.

From priory to home

If you happened to wake up on a snowy morning at Felley Priory then you would be in for a bit of a treat. The original priory was founded in the 12th century and was home to 12 Augustinian monks who seem to have had a good life with gardens, a stew pond well stocked with fat carp and a mill at the bottom of the slope. As we all know, life became a bit less comfortable for prelates during the reign of King Henry VIII when he dissolved the monasteries. Felley Priory was partially demolished and the monks scattered. Some parts of the original building survive and have been recycled to form parts of the later house and garden, but most of the building dates from the 16th and 17th centuries, with a few additions in the late 1800s.

The current layout to the gardens dates from the early 1970s when Major Robert and Maria Chaworth-Musters moved into the Priory. As the site is relatively high (183m/600ft above sea level) and exposed, the first things to be planted were the yew hedges that serve primarily as windbreaks for the herbaceous borders. Michelle Upchurch (Garden Manager, who has been at Felley for 25 years and makes sure everything runs smoothly) says, 'The yew hedges were chosen not only because they are evergreen but also because, contrary to rumour, they grow pretty quickly.'

These hedges have been imaginatively (and

skilfully) clipped to form a series of topiaries. There are peacocks, castles, swans (started around 1995 and trained around steel skeletons), coronets and lots of jaunty balls: a veritable feast of topiary. There was even a large robin made of hawthorn that had to be turned around after a horse ate its tail.

This is an art that goes back a long way: the Chinese and Japanese were clipping trees and shrubs a couple of millennia ago. In Europe, clipping to shapes possibly began with Gaius Matius Calvinus (a chum of Julius Caesar), whose garden was scattered with elaborate topiary, but the art became more widespread in 17th-century Dutch gardens. There was a bit of a dip in the 18th century when garden designers such as Charles Bridgeman and William Kent concentrated on a purer landscape style. But you cannot keep a good idea down: topiary soon returned to our gardens, and remains justifiably popular right up to the present day.

Passing the baton

Sadly, Maria Chaworth-Musters died in 2010, but her family still live in the house and continue to develop the garden. The hedges that look so sensational in the snow are cared for by a small team (Head Gardener Lindsey Ellis, hedgemeister Anthony Howard and a covey of indispensable volunteers), however this is not just a garden about topiary. Once the snow has melted, there are about 60 different cultivars of snowdrop scattered through the garden including some interesting rare selections (such as delightful yellow *Galanthus* 'Primrose Warburg'): a real galanthophile's paradise. These are followed by carpets of daffodils, some of them rare and unusual, a bluebell wood, deep herbaceous borders and a fine hydrangea collection.

One of the interesting things about seeing gardens in their most stripped-down state is how little we need to see in order to realise that we are standing somewhere special. You don't need flowers and sunshine to enjoy gardens: they help, but they are by no means essential. If you want colour then please come back later in the year but, right now, we have a garden standing quietly in the snow. Even when cold and bleak, Felley Priory is still a garden that is obviously much loved, well cared for – and with a bone structure that Marlene Dietrich would kill for. ●

Guarding the entrance to the house

Flag-topped castle turrets stand sentry on a terrace at the top of stairs leading to the Elizabethan manor house, its honeyed stone glowing in winter sunlight.



Ancient origins

The many-chimneyed house stands on yet-more ancient foundations, those of a priory founded as early as the 12th century, a casualty of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries that began in 1536. The pool in the foreground pre-dates the house: it supplied water to the mill run by the monks.

Visiting Felley Priory

Underwood, Nottinghamshire NG16 5FJ (between Mansfield and Nottingham, ½ mile from junction 27 of the M1). See: felleypriory.co.uk

Garden style: terraced garden to which structure and shape have been given by yew hedging that shelters herbaceous beds. Also an orchard, bluebell wood, plant nursery and tea room.

Standout plants: yew topiary, snowdrops, daffodils, roses and hydrangeas.

Aspect: garden surrounds a southeast-facing Elizabethan manor house on an exposed site with views across rolling Nottinghamshire countryside.

Open: all year, 9am–4pm, Tue–Fri; also Feb–Sept, 10am–4pm on the first and third Sundays of each month. Free access for RHS members Tuesdays and Wednesdays; see *RHS Members Handbook 2019* p115 for more information.

