

## TRENTHAM GARDENS IN LATE JANUARY

*Jackie Hemingway*

It is January, the sky a feather bed of cloud, the air keen and damp. Booted and well wrapped, a friend and I step out to explore Trentham gardens. Our first encounter is the river of grasses. We are quickly immersed in head-height foliage of pale straw and warm amber against the steely backdrop of the lake.

A hare twists its head to watch our approach but does not run. Some five or six feet tall, this bronze sculpture looks through the towering stipa and festuca at much the same level as our native hare would spy through ryegrass and cocksfoot in a summer meadow.

Deep within this giant landscape there are voices and movement. Gardeners clear winter vegetation, like a busy colony of ants spring cleaning their territory. A deep mulch of black rotting leaves is slowly raked back, releasing the rich, mushroomy taste of living earth. Crumbly from winter frost, the soil emits the gases and odours which betray the busy world beneath. Worms and centipedes, fungi and bacteria, industrious all winter; urgent with the business of decay to supply essential nutrients for spring growth.

With our bright umbrellas we could be ladybirds awoken from hibernation, busy exploring the delights of a new season. Piercing blue *Iris reticulata* with flashes of bright orange radiating from their nectaries await an early pollinator. A sunny celandine, a patch of trembling snowdrops, a modest hellebore face turned down.

Passing the Italian garden to our right, elegant colonnades and cypress trees are suggestive of a Shakespearean stage set. I keep an eye out for Puck or Peaseblossom peeping through the silver skeletons of last year's seed-heads. Occasionally one nods as an orb of accumulated raindrops plop to the ground. But this is not midsummer night. The place is deserted and the rain is getting heavy, so we hurry over to The Kings Wood.

Beneath the sturdy arching trees it is dry and warm. A blaze of orange witch hazel rolls out in a deep carpet before us and the air is thick with scent. High up in the gently idling branches hang big fat monkeys gazing down like friendly gargoyles. We wonder if we have been transported to an exotic land and laugh at the incongruity of tropical monkeys over-wintering in a leafless English woodland.



A Trentham fairy basks in the winter light

We shake our umbrellas, and as the silver droplets dance I spy a fairy by the lake. She points to a pair of whooper swans, lovers busy in a dance of courtship. High above, a clamour of powerful beating wings descends towards the water. A skein of geese land with much splashing and honking, happy to be home for the night.

We awake to the dimness of the light and realise that by some strange twist in time the day has all too quickly passed. Briskly we hurry on. Ducks and moorhens scurry for cover amongst the bulrushes as a breeze flips up ripples and spray. In the twilight we sense the shadows bearing down on us and quicken our step. Noses and cheeks pinched and puffing, we find the exit before the gates are locked and we depart, each with just a little bit of magic still glowing within us.

*Trentham Gardens, near Stoke-on-Trent, provides plenty of interest for a winter visit: the River of Grasses designed by Piet Oudolf, the Italian Garden by Tom Stuart-Smith, the Monkey Forest trail, and a mile-long lake set in a Capability Brown landscape. Sculpture features throughout.*

*Open daily. RHS members go free from 1st December – 31st March.*

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