



WINTER Hoar frost lends ivy leaves a touch of magic with a fringe of ice crystals. A fresh fall of snow transforms the countryside, giving a simple path through forest scrub an air of mystery and romance.

the WOODLAND YEAR

Woodlands have long played a crucial but often overlooked role in Britain's culture and landscape. Photographer *Jane Gifford* sings the praises of two woods near her home in the Cotswolds.

WOODLANDS hold a special place in the British psyche. We love to wander through swathes of bluebells and lie back amongst the flowers, drifting off through fresh spring leaves into a clear blue sky. In summer our woods become leafy temples inviting contemplation in the sanctuary of their dappled shade. We enjoy the rustling sound as we scuff through drifts of fallen leaves, shafts of misty sunlight darting through the amber and red of the autumn canopy. In winter sparkling

frosts can lift our mood, while bare branches silhouetted against the evening sky bring on a little self-indulgent melancholy. At the same time, our woodlands also appear as the haunt of dark spirits. We are lured from the path and off into the gloom, to become hopelessly lost as night falls. This lends an edge of excitement to any woodland visit. We can never be sure what lurks behind the trees.

My home is in the southern Cotswolds where we are fortunate still to have many ancient woods of

our native deciduous trees. Here the land undulates; it rises and dips like the sea. Every stream cuts a gully through the limestone and every far-reaching view is a mosaic of hills and hidden valleys. My two favourite woods are very different. One is nameless. Mostly of beech, it sits on top of a hill and covers little more than a couple of acres. For most of the year it is unremarkable. But in spring it is breathtaking. The show begins with celandines and wood-anemones and culminates in bluebells flowering



SPRING Bluebells are a favorite with everyone and a sure sign that spring has arrived. Our native wild cherry or 'goose' (*Prunus avium*) flowers at the same time (below) but is less well-known. Its blossom is more delicate than that of the cultivated cherry.





SUMMER When spring turns into summer (above), ramsons (*Allium ursinum*) often bloom so densely that there is little room for anything else on the woodland floor. They die back as the canopy closes over. Warm sunshine lights up the tops of the ash trees (above).



so densely that the flashes of blue between the tree trunks as you pass by on the lane are so bright, they are impossible to ignore. They are the cause of many a near collision.

You can smell the bluebells from the road, too. And standing amongst them, their lovely scent is so strong it makes you light-headed. Orange-tip butterflies flit from flower to flower and a stand of gean, our native wild cherry, tops off the display with a froth of white blossom.

Midger Wood is far larger but hidden from sight in a deep, steep-sided valley. You wouldn't know it was there. It's a nature reserve with a fast-flowing stream running through the middle. In spring, there are king-cups in marshy hollows, enchanter's nightshade, primroses, violets, wood-anemones and celandines but relatively few bluebells. Here the main display comes from the ramsons, often wrongly called wild garlic because of their strong smell when crushed.

Their white star-like flowers are held in delicate globes and the sight of millions of massed blooms is always stunning. Where they grow in great profusion, they are a reliable indicator that the wood is ancient. In Midger Wood there are many species of tree – crab-apple, oak, ash and field maple, hazel, holly and yew – to name only a few. There are still dormice on the margins, now rare elsewhere, as well as deer, badgers, foxes and owls all year round and nesting birds of prey in the spring. And there are indeed midges in the summer. But they are a small price to pay for this natural haven and the year-round pleasure it offers those lucky enough to make its acquaintance. **III**



AUTUMN Autumn winds strip the golden beech leaves from the trees (left). Field maples (*Acer campestre*) are first to show the change of season, turning a rich lustrous yellow. As winter takes hold again, delicate catkins shimmer against the harsh white snow (below).

