



A GARDEN FOR ALL
seasons

Some gardens are one-season wonders; a few are spectacular all year round.

Definitely one of the latter, Bath Botanical Gardens' continuous display

is hard to beat. Words and photographs by Jane Gifford



Top left: a thick carpet of red, gold and yellow leaves, including *Ginkgo biloba*, black mulberry and sweet gum. Top: *Acer palmatum* makes a striking display in the wild flower garden. Above, left: *Magnolia x soulangeana* surrounded by 'Mount Hood' daffodils. Above, right: a summer border featuring *Crocosmia* 'Lucifer', *Ligularia przewalskii* 'The Rocket', *Galega officinalis*, *Macleaya cordata* and *solidago*.



Crawling around Queen Square in heavy traffic, frustrated by Bath's one-way system, it's tempting to leave your car right where it is and walk across Victoria Park away from the chaos. If you did, you might chance upon Bath Botanical Gardens and if you stopped there for a while, you might forget that you had anything pressing to do in town. Not much more than 150 years ago, the same route would have taken you across open pasture and a jumble of allotments into a disused quarry. But since then, the grazing land has become the neat green expanses of Victoria Park, while the land surrounding the old quarry has been transformed into a secluded garden, where you can opt out of the 20th century for

a while. Created on the edge of the park by local plant collectors and enthusiasts in 1897, Bath Botanical Gardens have become a welcome place of escape for residents and an unexpected find for visitors. Perhaps because they are slightly off the beaten track, the Botanical Gardens are not well known. I originally came across them by accident – by far the best way. Within a relatively small space of some ten acres, you are pleasantly surprised by sunken rock gardens and informal drifts

of wild flowers, an ornamental vegetable garden, gaunt conifers and, overlooking a clear pond, a small replica of the Temple of Minerva, which was Bath's exhibit at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924.

Above: fed by spring water from

Lansdown and overlooked by the Temple

of Minerva, the pond

reflects a wonderful display of colour

produced by Japanese maples and

***Cotoneaster horizontalis*. Left: ornamental**

sea holly, *Eryngium amethystinum*,

in the thistle bed. Right: the autumn berries

of *Callicarpa bodinieri giraldii*.





You might be drawn to the cool, dappled shade of The Dell in the heart of the quarry, overlooked by some of the oldest trees in the park, or wander into more formal corners of the gardens with views across the town: It's a perfect place for contemplation. Walkways have been landscaped and planted so that each part of the gardens is obscured from the rest – even when people are about, you can usually find a quiet spot. Asked to take photographs for the new catalogue and guide to the Botanical Gardens, I had the perfect excuse to return again and again to follow the seasons around the flowerbeds and trees. *Acer pseudoplatanus* 'Brilliantissimum' is a delight in its salmon-pink spring foliage and, in a

season drenched in pink blossom from cherries and magnolias, camassias bloom in softest China blue. A particularly large example of *Cornus kousa chinensis* becomes a galaxy of stars in summer, covered in clusters of minuscule flowers, each one surrounded by four large waxy white bracts. And in its autumn foliage, *Cornus kousa* is a fiery, scarlet dome.

For me, the most magical features of Bath Botanical Gardens are the drifts of flowers that ebb and flow over lawns and banks throughout the year. Blue, pink and white waves of *Anemone blanda* wash over The Dell in spring. Delicate red and white striped pools of *Tulipa clusiana* gather under the trees, surrounded by Tenby and hoop petticoat daffodils. Elsewhere,

Above: *Prunus* 'Shirofugen' surrounded by a carpet of its fallen petals.



Left: decorative rhubarb chard and parsley in the ornamental vegetable garden. Right:

***Magnolia liliiflora* 'Nigra' is remarkable for its large, fragrant, richly coloured flowers, set off by dark green leaves.**





snowdrops and crocuses, scillas and fritillaries rise and fade back into the turf. And, as the leaves start to fall, the delicate pink flowers of *Cyclamen cilicium* force their way through the beech mast that softens the steep banks of the old quarry.

The pond below the Temple of Minerva is small and, like so many features of the gardens, it's possible to miss altogether. But this only adds to the gardens' charm, as each visit brings new surprises. In autumn, the pond reflects a wonderful display of colour, with scarlet, orange and amber acers rising above red-berried cotoneasters.

Acers are scattered throughout the Botanical Gardens and their extravagance of colour is

hard to overlook. More subtle autumn treats can be found in evergreen strawberry tree, which produces both red fleshy fruits, clusters of small white flowers. Earlier on in the season, the ingenious combination of *Nicotiana glauca* and *Impatiens* was resplendent in ornamental beds, while the deep blue gentian, *Gentiana septentrionalis*, bloomed more discreetly in a corner of the peat garden.

If early autumn frosts are severe, many of the trees lose their leaf which is disappointing. But in compensation the lawns are inches thick with a wonderful mosaic of gold, yellow and brown. Green yellow ginkgo leaves are distinctive in a glade of yellow and red *Acer palmatum* :

Above: the early spring-flowering

***Anemone blanda*, in delicate shades**

of pink and white, grows in profusion in

The Dell. Left: peonies growing

in the shrubbery. Right: drifts of brightly

coloured 'Apeldoorn' tulips

are just some of the many flowers

that ebb and flow over the lawns and

banks throughout the year.





A. japonicum. The vivid scarlet leaves of *Liquidambar styraciflua* are extraordinary as the melting ice intensifies their colour. The fastigate hornbeams manage to hang on to their yellow foliage, while dense clusters of purple berries on *Calliscarpa bodinieri giraldii* are quite a shock against so much yellow and red. When autumn colour fades, heather beds carry soft tones of pink and purple through the winter months. Bath Botanical Gardens are not a place of scientific research and discovery. There are many fine specimens, but no great rarities. Stan Hitt, responsible for the gardens from 1966-1987, explains that the collection is made up to a large extent from public donations. His main aim, now continued

by his successor David Littlewood, is simply to encourage a love of plants and gardens in all who spend time here – and his team of gardeners have been successful in this. As well as people pottering, flower-smelling and note-taking, I have seen schoolchildren happily sketching flowers, music and dance students rehearsing in quiet corners, clandestine meetings, and people and their dogs pondering life. The Botanical Gardens appear to have a therapeutic effect on everyone. ■

Bath Botanical Gardens, Royal Victoria Park, Bath, are open all year from dawn to dusk. For further information, contact Bath Botanical Gardens, 15a Milsom Street, Bath BA1 1DE, (0225) 448433.

Above: *Crocus tomasinianus* clusters

thickly beneath a Japanese maple

in the wild flower garden. Left:

the autumn foliage of a tree peony. Right:

a summer border, filled with

***Penstemon 'Evelyn'*, *coreopsis*,**

Salvia x superba*, *Anaphalis triplinervis

and *Cephalaria gigantea*, leads up to

the Temple of Minerva.

