

On the left of the water, the gold and red autumn leaves of *Nyssa sylvatica* glow. Opposite, on the right, is *Nyssa sinensis*. Behind stands a 400-year-old cedar of Lebanon.

# SETTING AUTUMN ABLAZE

An East Anglian garden puts on a spectacular show as it comes alive with a riot of rich colour

**T**UCKED AWAY DOWN narrow lanes in the undulating farmland of the Essex Suffolk border, a spectacular autumn display can be seen. Sheltered from the north wind by a 20 acre nature reserve of native trees and shrubs, three tree species, acers, nyssas and liquidambars, are competing to see which can display the richest hues in their eight acre garden.

From October through to December, they create a canvas splashed with scarlet, cerise and deep reds, punctuated by faded greens and old golds.

Screened from the River Stour by muted amber tones of birch trees and a silvery mist of willows, the acers are aglow. The site is home to approximately 50 of these slow-growing, small deciduous trees, with their graceful habit and beautiful foliage. The predominantly wine-dark *Acer palmatum* ‘Osakazuki’ spreads graceful branches to the ground, with leaves of ruby, dark salmon-pink and flame. Near it, *A. japonicum* ‘Laciniatum’ bears filigree foliage of raspberry-soft pinks and cream, with touches of

The red-fringed leaves of *Acer japonicum* ‘Laciniatum’, known as the downy Japanese maple from the white hairs on young leaves (far left). The ground below *Acer cappadocicum* ‘Aureum’ is covered with its five-lobed golden leaves (centre left). The scarlet autumn leaves of *Acer palmatum* ‘Osakazuki’ (left).



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The three narrow-toothed leaflets of *Acer triflorum* turn gold and orange in autumn.



Iain Grahame and his wife Bunny walk across the fallen leaves of *Acer cappadocicum* 'Aureum'.



The coppiced foxglove tree *Paulownia tomentosa* casts its reflection in the still waters of the pond. Behind, autumn tints of maple, birch, beech, tupelo, dogwood and grasses brighten a misty day.

purplish red. Turning red-gold, the rare *Acer triflorum* has been pruned into shape with an artist's eye. "So many people shove trees in the ground and forget about them. They become misshapen, whereas the judicious cutting of their branches can give them their beautiful form," says Major Iain Grahame, the garden's creator.

#### Hurricane's effects

Almost as soon as he arrived at Daws Hall in 1965, Iain started to oversee the planting of trees in a process still ongoing today. His plantings include a coastal redwood, *Sequoia sempervirens*, a giant fir, *Abies grandis*, and two swamp cypresses, *Taxodium distichum*. They all now combine to define the shape of the garden.

"I look at the trees, which have been in the garden for 20, 30, 40 years and are immovable," he says. "Then I use my eye and brain to try to coordinate what would look pleasing around them and what would look good in certain seasons."

Originally, part of what is now the garden was covered by

an acre of oak and beech trees. An ancient mulberry tree had also been standing there for centuries. But the 1987 hurricane uprooted the beeches, the mulberry and all but five of the oaks. It took a year to clear away the debris.

"However, looking back, the demise of the wood created a perfect environment to start again," says Iain. "Planting traditional woodland provided natural shelter, even though that hadn't been my intention when I originally did it. If I have done anything sensible in my whole life, it has been to plant trees all the time I've been here."

He started with no horticultural knowledge, confessing to not even knowing what a cotoneaster was. In the 1970s, he grew Christmas trees, before discovering that the expense of

transport to market hardly covered his costs. The four acres he used are now a wildflower meadow, with more than 100 recorded species, including knapweed, cowslips, vetches, St John's Wort and meadow saxifrages. The yellow rattle, introduced to control aggressive grasses, has done its job, creating optimum conditions for wildflowers to thrive.

"By then, I was listening to people who knew what they were talking about, and employing common sense," he says.

#### Specimen trees

After seeing and falling in love with a foxglove tree, *Paulownia tomentosa*, in Beth Chatto's garden, Iain sourced his own. Somewhat to his surprise, he found it flourished in

his light, slightly acid soil. He now has several that flower in May, plus those that he coppices each February to produce huge 30-inch (75cm) leaves. He now also grows two more types of paulownia, *P. kawakamii* and *P. catalpifolia*, the former an endangered tree in its native China. In autumn, their large green leaves contrast with the rich reds and golds around them.

On the razed ground, he excavated two ponds below an existing pool that had been there for centuries. This was fed from a borehole that Iain was able to use to feed into the new ponds. Water continues down a gentle slope into the nature reserve, feeding a dipping pond used for educational purposes. Today a small flock of endangered Russian ➤





The red and orange palmate foliage of *Acer palmatum* var *heptalobum* creates a beacon of light in the autumn mist.

THREE TREES FOR A SPECTACULAR SHOW

The majority of the autumn colour at Daws Hall comes from acers, nyssas and liquidambar. All are deciduous trees or shrubs grown for their elegant habit, autumn colour and beautiful foliage. *Acer palmatum*, the Japanese maple, is capable of reaching 26-30ft (8-9m) in height. Most, however, are slow-growing, small trees. Ideal conditions are a sheltered site with sandy loam soil that is slightly acidic and well-drained. Nyssa, or tupelo, trees are small and slow growing. *N. sylvatica* comes from North America and has ovate leaves that turn brilliant red and yellow in autumn. It grows best on soils that are moist and fertile in a site that provides shelter from cold, dry winds. *Nyssa sinensis* is a spreading tree or shrub that can reach 33ft (10m). There are four species of liquidambar, the commonest and hardiest being *L. styraciflua* from eastern North America. It is known as the sweet gum for the fragrant resin. It is tolerant of both wet and dry soils, but chalky soils hinder the development of the autumn leaf colour.

red-breasted geese and several other species of waterfowl live in this area. They are protected by a predator-proof fence that surrounds this part of the garden.

Now, everywhere is a feast of colour for the eye. *Acer cappadocicum* ‘Aureum’, its crown a gilded green, stands in a pool of amber, bronze and lemon-yellow leaves which have fallen onto the grass below.

“Autumn is an incredibly exciting time,” says Iain. “You think the garden is finished, and then every day you see more reds and pinks and oranges. It’s a long season here, as the trees don’t change colour at once. The drama continues until the liquidambar catch fire late in the year, and *Acer rubrum* ‘October Glory’ is in its full glory into December.

Underfoot, cyclamen and nerines grow. A carpet of ripe-apple red, yellow and pale green leaves smothers the grass under an *Acer henryi*. The deeply indented leaves of *Acer palmatum* ‘Sango-kaku’, one of the most delicate of the Daws Hall maples, are turning from soft green to salmon pink around the edges, on cardinal red stems.

*Acer palmatum* ‘Heptalobum’ is on fire, dazzling, bright vermilion, a few leaves tinged with orange-gold, coppery reds and scarlet, and some laced with touches of burnt orange.

“You can prune the acers quite brutally,” he says. “They are at their best when throwing up new leaves and new shoots. Later in the year, when they are leafless, the stems are bright red against the snow.”

A vista of richness

His love affair with acers began when he left the Army, shortly before he bought Daws Hall. “I went to the Royal Agricultural College at Cirencester for a year, which is very close to Westonbirt Arboretum. I remember going in autumn and seeing the wonderful colours of the acers,” he recalls. Today, he has built up a collection of approximately 50 and is still planting them now.

Liquidambar also appealed for their beautiful autumn hues, which ensure the garden’s colour lasts into the later months of the year. Iain first encountered nyssas, or tupelo trees, on an autumn visit to a garden in Sussex approximately 20 years ago. “I experimented with them, and they seem to love it here, although they do need to be planted close to water, so they suit the areas around the ponds and streams.”

Beautiful berries

Autumn colour also comes from berries, shrubs and perennials at this time of year. Past a *Sorbus koehneana*, its clusters of white berries magenta-stained around the sepals, there is a glimpse of neon-pink berries on *Euonymus europaeus*, the spindle tree.

An unusual *Callicarpa bodinieri* var *giraldii* shrub bears clusters of shiny mauve berries on spreading, low-growing branches as its leaves fade to eau-de-nil.

A powder-blue herbaceous perennial *Salvia uliginosa*, or ➤

The rare red-breasted geese in the garden.



The fiery colours of *Liquidambar styraciflua*.



*Acer rubrum* ‘October Glory’ puts on a spectacular show into the last months of the year.







The red stems of *Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku' add to its autumn show.

## EDUCATION AT DAWS HALL

Daws Hall Centre for Environmental Education offers visits across all ages and areas of the curriculum and tailors each visit to the specific requirements of the group, syllabus and season. The reserve offers fantastic habitats, facilities and resources available for day visits and field courses alike.

The reserve is ideal for environmental studies in biology and geography and is able to offer unique experiences such as small mammal trapping, moth trapping, direct access to the River Stour and tributaries, and examples of changing plant communities. The 25 acre, privately owned site, is also the ideal tranquil setting for art, photography and media. The team are passionate about providing experiences across the seasons to appreciate the full beauty of the reserve. The Stour valley has long been inspiring artists. Thomas Gainsborough painted a view of Stour cliff, now part of the reserve, while John Constable painted Daws Hall itself. In addition to curriculum led programmes, the centre also offers alternative learning options such as mindfulness in nature, forest schools/bush craft, team building, and environmental ethics. It also welcomes families, pre-school groups, societies and adults with disabilities alongside schools. Daws Hall Trust is passionate about the natural world, conservation and sustainability and takes great pride in providing inspirational outdoor learning. To date over 100,000 schoolchildren have benefitted from visits to Daws Hall and it aims to inspire many more in the future.

bog sage, splays late flowers over the water's edge near a large *Nyssa sylvatica*, or black tupelo, growing on the bank. The nyssa's graceful branches are alight with coral reds and flame and green-gold. Further along, the foliage of a smaller *Nyssa sinensis*, a tupelo from China, is turning a gentle reddish-brown. Its long, large leaves turn a deeper brick red through the autumn.

By contrast, a slow-growing weeping beech is dropping sombre viridian and pewter leaves, tinged with bronze. They cover the grass by the water.

Dogwoods by the lower pond sport pink-red stems under a golden rain tree, *Koelreuteria paniculata*. The latter's leaves are classic autumn bronze-green and gold, with seed pods the shape of Chinese lanterns ripening from orange to pink. A flamboyant cornus 'Norman Hadden' hangs fruits like outsize raspberries over the water, crushed raspberry-pink.

The sudden sweet scent of the deciduous shrub *Eleagnus angustifolia* 'Quicksilver' drifts past the splayed shape of another, *Prunus incisa* 'Kojo-no-mai', with leaves of pastel beige-tinged pink. Not far away, the gentle greens of an *Acer dissectum* 'Emerald Lace' are tinged with soft maroon in the low light.

### Advice from experience

"If I have any advice to gardeners from what I have learned over the years, it's this: first of all, find out your soil type," says Iain. "Secondly, check the full-grown size of the trees you're planting and don't plant them too close to each other. Thirdly, spoil them with mulch and water and feed; love them, give them tender loving care. I talk to my trees, of course I do!

"Finally, go around as many gardens as possible. I never stop looking at other people's gardens, I'm always taking notes. I never stop learning, both what to do and, equally important, what not to do. A garden is a work in progress. It's never ending; some plantings work, others disappoint. You discover something more interesting. All the time the shape of the garden changes."

Back in the woods, jays flit through the canopy with a harsh screech, beech mast crunches underfoot, and the robin sings its autumn song as corvids flock to roost. It is autumn, the end of the year approaches, but the glorious colours of Daws Hall's trees are an uplifting sight, a reminder that nature's show is never over. ■

• Words: Rosamond Richardson • Photography: Nicola Stocken

### CONTACT

**Daws Hall Trust** [www.dawshallnature.co.uk](http://www.dawshallnature.co.uk) 01787 269766. *Autumn Colours Open Day: Sunday 22 October, 12-4pm. £5 adults, £1 children aged over five. The gardens are also open by appointment to Women's Institutes and garden societies, when Iain Grahame gives conducted tours. All proceeds from open days and tours go to the Daws Hall Trust.*

Photography: Alamy, GAP Photos



Contrasting gold and red foliage creates bands of flames across the grass.

## MORE AUTUMN COLOUR

***Acer palmatum dissectum* 'Crimson Queen'** – the fine, light feathery foliage turns bronze-red.

***Acer dissectum* 'Emerald Lace'** – red-tinted shoots carry foliage that turns to deep purple-red burgundy, with tints of orange.

***Acer palmatum* 'Eddisbury'** – deeply-lobed leaves turn to soft crimson, carried on blood-red stalks.

***Nyssa sylvatica* 'Autumn Cascade'** – showy red and orange foliage is carried on weeping branches.

***Cercidiphyllum japonicum*** – known as the katsura tree, its vivid orange and gold foliage smells strongly of burnt sugar.

***Parrotiopsis jacquemontiana*** – a member of the witch hazel family, the leaves fade to butter yellow.

***Cotinus coggygria*** – the rounded leaves of the smoke bush turn a mixture of purplish-red and light crimson.

***Cornus controversa* 'Variegata'** – called the wedding cake tree because of its distinctive horizontal tiers, its foliage turns reddish purple, with more colour from blue-black berries.