



Maple Magic

Cooling weather and shortening days means autumn colour, and at Andrew's Corner, on the edge of Dartmoor, you can enjoy it to the full. Words and pictures by Jan Barwick



Main picture
A. palmatum
'Sangu-kaku'

Inset from top
Hydrangea
'Green Shadow':
Rhododendron
quiquifolium:
glossy wine-gum-
coloured leaves of
the *Liquidamber*





Fancying a place by the sea in Devon when they moved from Hertfordshire in 1967, Robin Hill's parents ended up in Belstone on the northern edge of Dartmoor, "which is about as far from the sea as you can get in this county," Robin said with a laugh. "When they came here it was all wide open spaces and sweeping views of Dartmoor with mostly lawns, a few ponticum rhododendrons and some sad-looking roses. But as they were both keen gardeners, they set about changing things to their own satisfaction.

In the late '60s and early '70s, island beds with heathers and dwarf conifers were very fashionable, so that's what they did, although that's mostly all gone now." They also planted a number of maples, and it's these which now provide the backbone to the current garden at Andrew's Corner, together with many that Robin has planted himself in the years since, and which produce such a swathe of spectacular colour when the leaves turn in autumn. Robin and his wife, Edwina, had moved in with his then widowed father in 1979, and their son and his partner also joined them for a period, so what you can see in the garden now is the result of three generations' worth of effort.

Above from left

A log provides a natural seat: Robin and Edwina Hill: The swing seat is backed by another hybrid maple

Opposite page

An enticing tunnel framed by reddening leaves of *Acer palmatum* 'Atropupureum'

In 1972 the National Gardens Scheme had got wind that Andrew's Corner was a garden worth visiting, and it opened then for the first time. Robin even has the original 'donkey book' from that date ("a very slim volume") when the entry fee was 10p, half price for children. It has opened annually for the NGS ever since, as well as also opening for other charities like the Children's Hospice South West and the Devon Air Ambulance – "all three things that are close to our hearts".

Andrew's Corner is in a magnificent position high on the hill above Skaigh Cleave, with the River Taw bubbling in the gorge below. Facing south, it's protected both from the north and prevailing south-west winds, although chilly Siberian easterlies can deliver some nasty conditions. Its acid soil is shallow and full of shillet, which may not sound the most ideal of growing conditions but does hold moisture well, particularly as it is enriched with masses of home-grown compost.

"The trees, once established, get their roots down into it and do really well, considering that we're 950ft above sea level." Although, like most gardeners in the South-west, Robin has been tempted by the long run of mild winters prior to 2009 to grow things that are probably a bit too tender. "I lost some bottle brush plants, and the phormiums don't like the cold winters, but they're slowly coming back," Mostly he sticks with things that are happy with Dartmoor's more taxing conditions, buying in plants from nurseries in the north of the country where the climate is more like Dartmoor's, or growing from seed that he's bred himself.

"I do grow masses from home-grown seed, although it's a very trial-and-error business. I sow twice a year, once in autumn when it's fresh off the plant, then I keep some in the fridge and sow again in the spring, so I get two chances. Often too you can't put a finger on why something fails, so I try and propagate enough so I can put examples in more than one part of the garden, because what won't thrive in one area will do perfectly well in another. Sometimes the particular microclimate that the plant's in is significant as to whether or not it survives.



In October the brilliant autumn colour is on show... the differently coloured maples will be turning, particularly if there is quiet weather and frosts



Several people around here lost their pittosporums last winter, but ours were fine, because they're in a sheltered position."

The garden is more decorative at the top near the house, with winding grassy paths leading from secluded area to secluded area, and where graceful maples with shrubby underplantings and woodland-loving perennials predominate, whereas further down, where Robin has his vegetable beds, there are fewer trees and the views across Dartmoor beyond open out.

Although the heather and dwarf conifer beds planted by his parents have largely gone, Robin has reinstated some of the heather, with varieties that flower throughout the year. "They're deeply unfashionable, but do have their place, particularly in a moorland garden. In fact

there was a TV crew here working on a programme about wild gardens – they wanted to connect the garden with the moor, and heathers were the obvious connection. The only trouble was that the area of moorland that we can see here, across to Cosdon Beacon, and to where they panned their cameras, has no heathers at all, which didn't seem to worry them in the slightest!"

The vegetable area, organically managed, was his son's particular baby. "He and his partner lived with us for a while and redeveloped the vegetable garden using unusual and heritage varieties, like the purple-podded broad beans and peas. We did have one before but never did much with it. Now they've moved to Ashburton but I've continued with what they started, growing both standard and heritage varieties and it

feeds us for a good part of the year. We've also kept the chickens that they introduced." Their largely organic management means that the garden is also a bit of a wildlife paradise. "There are masses of amphibians and grass snakes (which breed in the compost heaps) encouraged here by the pond. We've recorded over 40 varieties of birds and loads of butterflies." Sheep, which occasionally wander in from the moor if the gate is ever left open, (which it is on open days), are less welcome visitors, but the rabbits and deer are kept at bay by tight fencing and Ginny, Mabel and Misty, the resident dog and two cats.

Andrew's Corner is designed to look good throughout the year, and has regular charity openings to display its particular seasonal highlights. A February 'snowdrop Sunday' showed off Robin's

**Above**

Yellow birch leaves scatter the lawn near the pond

Opposite page (clockwise from top left)

Hydrangea 'Brunette': Fallen *Acer cappadocicum* 'Aureum' leaves brighten the grass: *Viburnum plicatum tomentosum*: *Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium'

Andrew's Corner, Belstone

(3 miles east of Okehampton.) Park on the common and take the road towards Skaigh. The garden is several hundred metres down on the right.

Open 16 October for the NGS, and 23 October for Children's Hospice South West, 2.30-5.30pm, with cream teas available.

Also open by appointment, 01837 840332.

60-plus varieties, the cyclamineus daffodils and erythronium collection were on view in April, while in May and early June the spring acid-loving shrubs were at their flowering best for the NGS openings. Robin and Edwina also have candlelit evenings in August ("lovely if the weather's good, horrible if it rains"), then in October the brilliant autumn colour is on show. By now the numerous and differently coloured maples will be turning, particularly if there is quiet weather and frosts, to be joined by, amongst others, yellowing birches and ginkgo, reddening *Viburnum* and *Cercis* and the wine-gum variety of *Liquidamber*. Robin also has numerous hydrangeas which are still flowering at this time, a bed of autumn gentians, which will be at their best, and by the pond an unexpected cluster of hardy

pitcher plants (*Sarracenia*). And one feature of the garden which plants-people will love – nearly everything that you might want to identify is well labelled. □

Other gardens open this month for good autumn colour

Some of the best open gardens for this month include: Marwood Mill Gardens near Barnstaple; RHS Rosemoor at Torrington; Garden House at Buckland Monochorum; and Knightshayes, near Tiverton (all open daily in October).

Castle Hill, near Filleigh, has autumn colour walks every Sunday in October, 11am-4pm.

Lukesland, near Ivybridge, is open for autumn colour viewing on Weds and Suns, 16 October – 13 November.