

## 1 Cover story

Snow covers Allt-y-bela in a blanket of white, leaving only the buildings and the forms of trees and topiary clearly visible. The view from the hill behind the house gives me an opportunity to look at how the house and garden relate to each other, without distractions from colour and detail.



Arne Maynard is a leading garden designer based in London and Monmouthshire.

# Christmas at Allt-y-bela

Come wind, rain or snow, Christmas is the time to enjoy the season and view the garden from a different perspective

WORDS ARNE MAYNARD PHOTOGRAPHS WILLIAM COLLINSON

## 2 Wood spirit

Our Christmas tree is always something from the woods or fields, and the search for the right thing is part of the pleasure of this ritual. There's a pagan feel to it. Last year's find was an old branch wreathed in mistletoe, which I carried back home over the snowy fields.



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## 3 Natural decorations

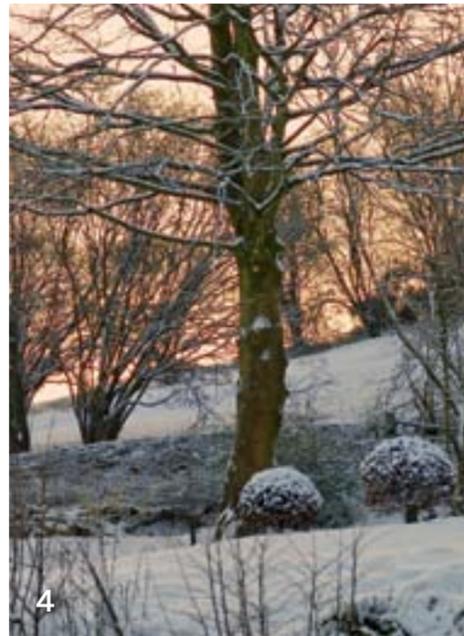
The espaliered crab apples (*Malus 'Evereste'*) outside the house are festively laden with orange and yellow fruits and these bring the birds in. I chose trees I knew would attract birds, and the life they bring to the garden in winter feels like our reward.



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## 4 Winter light

Snow transforms familiar places. A low winter sun illuminates the bare branches of trees in the field above our drive and there's little to indicate where garden ends and landscape begins, except for two small topiaries with snow hats.



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## 5 Line drawing

Frost and snow act magically on topiary, and the twiggy winter outline of a topiary beech, still partially clad in its leaves, stands out dramatically among a group of evergreens.



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Christmas is one of my favourite times of year. With the garden tidied and put to bed for winter, it's a time I can spend at home, and just enjoy being with family and friends. I particularly love it when it snows, and we've been lucky that every year since we moved to Allt-y-bela, it has snowed about Christmas time and the snow has lingered.

Snow transforms everything, and if there are unfinished jobs in the garden they're hidden from sight under a blanket of softness. This is when I like to wander around, take stock of the last year, and dream about what I'm going to do

next. I'll probably look at garden books and go through back issues of a few magazines.

One of the amazing things about snow is the way it neutralises. With all colour in the garden removed, it's like looking at a black and white photo or a pencil drawing: the architectural elements become dominant. In this monochrome world, you can see the structure without distraction from grass or flowers and get a sense of the scale between plants and buildings. I can look at the topiary pieces near the house, decide if they're big enough or need to be bigger and whether I need to add more.



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## 6 Sugar craft

The last rose of summer, looking like a wonderful piece of confectionary, bent but somehow miraculously intact under a sprinkling of ice crystals.

## Suppliers

At Langley Boxwood Nursery, they sell pre-clipped topiary forms or you can purchase bushy plants for clipping yourself. They also run courses on topiary.

[www.boxwood.co.uk](http://www.boxwood.co.uk)

These three nurseries have a selection of excellent pre-formed topiary:

- [www.crowntopiary.co.uk](http://www.crowntopiary.co.uk)
- [www.majestictrees.co.uk](http://www.majestictrees.co.uk)
- [www.romantic-garden-nursery.co.uk](http://www.romantic-garden-nursery.co.uk)

The intricacy of a laid hedge comes into sharp focus in the winter – it's a craft that's well worth supporting (see picture 4). The National Hedgelaying Society has a directory of groups – [www.hedgelaying.org.uk](http://www.hedgelaying.org.uk)

The quietness and stillness that descends on the house when it snows is something to be savoured. We go for long walks, make fires, and cook delicious meals. On Christmas Eve itself, we have a ritual of going out over the fields with the dogs to look for something that will be our Christmas tree. Whatever we find, a bough with mistletoe or a berried hawthorn branch, is brought back into the house, balanced in a great big urn and decorated with candles and a few hand-made stars or rosy crab apples.

Snow slows everything down and almost forces you to observe and appreciate what's

around you. Familiar places look different, and I find myself noticing details like the last leaves hanging on a tree. Other things become special, like taking a brazier outside, lighting a fire and standing around it with friends, drinking sloe gin. For me, it's about being part of the environment, and really celebrating it, rather than moaning that you can't drive anywhere. On a snowy, sunny day I wouldn't think twice about having lunch outside. We'd wrap up and eat a hot stew with glasses of steaming mulled wine. □ In the February issue, designer Annie Guilfoyle begins a new series – Design Solutions.