





High-summer splendour

The garden and arboretum at Cedar House,
Wasperton, Warwickshire

The home of David and Sandra Burbidge

New collections of trees and shrubs, colourful
herbaceous plantings and dedication to its
development have transformed these six acres into
a major showpiece, writes **Charles Quest-Ritson**

Photographs by Clive Nichols



DAVID AND SANDRA BURBIDGE have lived at Cedar House since 1975, but their garden has only begun to expand during the past few years as Mr Burbidge plunges ever more deeply into enjoying his remarkable creation.

Cedar House was Wasperton's vicarage, sold off by the Diocese of Coventry in the 1930s and renamed in honour of the immense cedar of Lebanon that is still a fine feature of the woodland garden. The church itself was substantially rebuilt in the 1840s by Sir George Gilbert Scott, with some input also from Augustus Pugin, and is so close to Cedar House that the Burbidges made the little spire on its west end an eyecatcher when laying out their garden.

In their early years at Wasperton, it was Mrs Burbidge who ran the garden—well

enough for the county organiser of the National Garden Scheme to suggest that she should take on the job as his successor. She did so, and headed up 'the Yellow Book' in Warwickshire for some eight years, during which time the Burbidges felt that they should open their own garden as part of the scheme. Looking back, they say that the garden wasn't really good enough at that time, although it has been much praised since it reopened in 2023.

Mr Burbidge has always been a keen gardener, but, until 2018—when he reached the age of 75 and felt the time had come for a change—this had to play second string to his career as a manufacturer of upmarket furniture and to his many public and charitable undertakings. Plants, designs and new features are now his constant companions in the major overhaul of his six acres, turning

them from a pleasant, conventional garden with many underdeveloped areas into a major showpiece that fizzles with excitements.

The site is flat and the soil sandy gravel, but surprisingly fertile, with a pH that allows for acid-loving plants to flourish. Within those six acres, there is now a great number of distinct gardens and habitats all maintained by one full-time gardener and three part timers who, together, equate to a second full timer.

Some 1,500 tulips are planted every year, mainly along the driveway and around the house. They are followed by a huge planting of dahlias. Such bursts of colour are also delivered by his more permanent plantings. The cultivars of *Acer palmatum*—he has some 40 plants—are a particular favourite, but he has also collected many other trees and shrubs that have caught his imagination.



Preceding pages: **Armillary Sphere** by David Harber with Wasperton's St John the Baptist church in the background. **Left:** Planting around the pond with *Helenium* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer', *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' and *Ageratina altissima* 'Chocolate'. **Above:** The entrance to the arboretum with *Hydrangea aspera* 'Hot Chocolate', *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Acer shirasawanum* Moonrise and *Acer palmatum* 'Shaina'

He is particularly pleased with his unusual forms of *Ginkgo biloba*, the 'living-fossil tree' with ancestors that date back to the Middle Jurassic period. They include 'Fastigiata' and 'Obelisk', both of them neatly columnar, even pencil-shaped.

Many of the great number of young trees and shrubs now happily growing at Cedar House are the fruits of advice from experts and mentors such as John Massey of Ashwood Nurseries in the West Midlands and Robert Vernon of Bluebell Arboretum and Nursery on the Derbyshire/Leicestershire border. These join many of the original trees that were in the garden, such as native oaks whose shade has provided for extensive underplantings. Hellebores, ferns and snowdrops are among the genera that the Burbidges have been collecting. Many magnolias and

camellias enjoy the light shade and there is a fine double border almost entirely composed of rhododendrons and azaleas. The garden's development has also been aided by visits to other gardens and getting to know the owners of famous private gardens such as Anne Chambers of Kiftsgate near Chipping Camden in Gloucestershire, Nicola Taylor of Evenley Wood in Northamptonshire (COUNTRY LIFE, *March 29, 2025*) and Neil Lucas of the Knoll Gardens near Wimborne, Dorset (COUNTRY LIFE, *July 30, 2025*).

The Cedar House garden is watered via a borehole, 138ft deep. This has enabled the Burbidges to add a substantial new feature—an expanse of water too small to be called a lake, but too large to be merely a pond. The spoil from excavating the site was piled up to one side, where a sheltered viewing platform

now overlooks the new aquatic plantings. Water lilies break the surface of the water—our native yellow-flowered *Nymphoides peltata* has flourished—and a great number of marginal plants frame the water from every viewpoint. *Gunnera manicata* (the 'giant rhubarb'), *Lysichiton americanus* ('skunk cabbage') and *Eutrochium maculatum* (Atropurpureum Group) 'Purple Bush' (the form of Joe Pye plant with dark flowers and purple leaves) all look as if they have been growing for many years, as do our native bulrushes *Typha latifolia*. Ornamental grasses surround much of the lake and the mound around the viewing platform is thick with *Verbena bonariensis* all summer long.

There is a good sprinkling of sculptures from around the world all giving character to the views within the garden. The Burbidges →





have also made a stumpery in the woodland garden, which is not the usual pile of excavated tree stumps, but a collection of specimens laid on the surface around the fat trunk of a large beech tree that fell in 2018 and created a space for lots of new plantings.

The woodland gardens are best in spring. More than 20 witch hazels, cultivars of *Hamelis*, are first in the year to make a big impact, not least because they are planted together as one substantial grouping in a well-chosen glade. They are followed by several forms of *Cercis canadensis*, the American redbud or Judas tree, many cultivars of flowering dogwoods and rare selections of *Styrax japonica*, the Japanese snowbell tree, including 'Pink Snowbell' and 'Purple Dress'. Hydrangeas are another interest, as are ornamental crab apples—the Malus Walk has been extended several times. Mr Burbidge champions *Malus* 'Evereste' as one of the best, for its abundance of deep-pink buds and white flowers, fine autumn colour and a crop of yellow, orange and red crabapples that last through to the new year and are excellent for making jelly.

‘Some 1,500 tulips are planted every year around the house’

Mr Burbidge's favourite season is late autumn. The first of the trees and shrubs to colour up are his groves of *Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii* and *Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii* 'Doorenbos', both of which follow through with beautiful bark in winter. For autumn colour, he recommends the Canadian maple *Acer x freemanii* 'Autumn Blaze' and Chinese *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Boyd's Dwarf', which, despite its name, grows to 12ft and remains in scale with the rest of the garden.

What of the future? A new gravel garden, inspired by Beth Chatto, is under way and there are plans to make a feature of the area around a vintage sycamore, perhaps 200 years old, which is listed as 'notable' by the Woodland Trust. Its trunk is squat and thick, with a gnarled and knobbly surface. Mr Burbidge admits to being a man in a hurry. It will be fascinating to see how every part of the garden—already so beautiful, impressive and mature—continues to develop and intensify. 🐌

Cedar House Gardens and Arboretum, Wasperton, Warwickshire, opens for the National Garden Scheme on August 30 and for groups by prior arrangement (www.cedarhousegardens.co.uk)

A wooden platform takes you among the billowing planting around the pond with margins colonised by native bullrushes