

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Brazilian fuchsia



Euphorbia griffithii fireglow



Pieris japonica

Fuchsia is flowering its socks off

PIERIS japonica is an attractive evergreen shrub, grown for its handsome foliage and display of early spring flowers. The young leaves are often bronze or red, maturing to dark green. They contrast beautifully with the small, white jewel-like flowers, which are very attractive to bees.

You can see the flowers on the shrub, growing in my garden, in the picture above. It is planted behind the railway sleepers and looks pretty popping over the top.

Pieris is perfect for growing in a shrub border or woodland area, but it does require acid soil which is moist, but well drained. It also benefits from a sheltered, partially shaded spot.

The only garden opening for the National Garden Scheme this weekend, both today and tomorrow, is Butlers Farmhouse in Butlers Lane, Herstmonceux.

This is the garden of the scheme's county organiser for East and Mid Sussex Irene Eltringham-Willson. It will open between 2pm and 5pm with entry £6 and children free.

It is a lovely rural setting for this one-acre garden surrounding the 16th century farmhouse, with views of South Downs.

It's extremely pretty at this time of the year with a profusion of daffodils, hellebores and primroses. It has been called quite quirky, with surprises round every corner, including a rainbow border, small pond, Cornish-inspired beach corners, a poison garden and secret jungle garden. Full details at www.ngs.org.uk

Another plant looking good in my garden this weekend is Euphorbia griffithii "Fireglow". This perennial dies back to below ground level each year in autumn, then fresh new growth appears again in spring.

It prefers partial shade in light, well-drained garden soil and is extremely fast growing. Its flowering period is from June through to September, mine have started already as you can see from the picture above and it is fully hardy. Its dark green leaves are edged in an orange-red and are topped with bright, brick-red summer flowers that gen-

tly fade to yellow in autumn before dying back. This fabulous spurge looks best as part of a vibrant planting scheme based on hot colours in a sunny border, or with bronze-tinted ornamental grasses.

Given a moist, well-drained soil, it may need restricting, since it quickly forms small colonies. Mine is growing in the raised brick bed just inside the garden gate.

In autumn you should cut back the faded flower stems, avoiding new ones. When working with spurges always wear gloves, since the milky sap is poisonous and a potential skin irritant. Remove unwanted seedlings each spring as part of routine border maintenance.

Flowering its socks off in the greenhouse is my stunning Brazilian fuchsia.

It is a bushy evergreen shrub growing up to 60cm in height, with small, ovate, dark green leaves and small nodding clusters of tubular, yellow and scarlet flowers, 2cm in length. It has a long flowering period, from late autumn to early spring and is an exquisite winter flowering shrub.

This unusual, tender, shrub will brighten up the winter months with its tropical, two-tone, tubular flowers. The dangling blooms are borne in profusion from winter to early spring, set against a background of dark, evergreen foliage. *Justicia rizzinii*, to give it its proper name, is an exotic evergreen shrub, requiring a frost-free position all year round.

It makes a neat and compact container plant, perfect for a warm conservatory or heated greenhouse, which is where mine spends the colder months. In very mild, frost-free locations it may be grown outdoors in a sheltered sunny border.

The weather was so cold and wet this past winter, that I found one of the containers on my three Chinese Elm bonsai trees had cracked beyond repair. The new one matches the colour of the mirror now too. I've had all three trees for nearly 30 years now. The Chinese Elm is indigenous to China and south-east Asia. In its native environment it can be a mighty tree reaching heights of up to 25 metres.

It develops a fine branch ramification with small leaves, which



Geoff with the newly potted bonsai

makes it a very suitable Bonsai plant. It thrives in either full sun and/or partial shade. In temperate climates, it can be left outdoors even during winter months, as mine has. The Chinese Elm can usually endure some frost but it differs depending on the region it was imported from. Trees from northern Chinese regions are more frost-hardy than those coming from southern areas. Depending on winter temperatures Chinese Elms either drop their leaves or keep them until spring when the new shoots emerge. Mine is just beginning to sport lots of new growth.

Another fun piece of sculpture in the garden is this small metal bird, carefully glued to the wooden handle of an old garden fork which had seen better days, a perfect piece of recycling.

Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk



The little metal bird glued to an old fork handle