

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Euphorbia characias



Snowdrops at Pembury House



Hellebore Argutifolius driftwood

Seedy Saturday and plenty of seasonal favourites coming alive

TODAY, Saturday 1st, why not visit Seedy Saturday taking place in Lewes Town Hall from 10am to 3pm with entrance £2 for adults, cash only, and children are free.

The event brings people together to swap locally saved seeds, find out about community projects and join in workshops and talks. There will be carefully selected stalls offering an extensive range of usual and unusual seeds and plants, seed potatoes, shallots, reconditioned garden tools, plant supports, and hand-crafted bird boxes.

There will be children's seed planting activities, music, and warming soup, teas, coffee and cake. There's also Seedy Sunday in Brighton tomorrow at Brighton open market between 10am and 4pm.

Tomorrow, I begin this year's season of Sunday broadcasts on BBC Radio Sussex, joining Pat Marsh on Sunday Gardening to talk about gardens opening for the National Garden Scheme. The first two sessions, 2nd February and 2nd March will cover gardens opening in those months and then on 30th March, I'll begin weekly sessions once more. February gardens are all about snowdrops. Here are a few facts you might not know about them. Its Greek name is 'Galanthus' which translates as 'milk flower'. A naturally occurring substance within the plant, called galantamine, is used to help treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, although the bulbs themselves are poisonous. The flowers were named after earrings not drops of snow and there are more than 2,500 varieties of snowdrop.

They are symbolic of spring, purity and religion and are one of the first flowers to appear in the new year. In the northern hemisphere snowdrops can be seen appearing as early as January, weather permitting. They usually flower between the months of January and April. Collecting snowdrop bulbs in the wild is illegal in many countries. For many, you need a license to sell snowdrop bulbs, as they're covered by CITES regulations (the Convention on International Trade

in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna). It's actually illegal to transfer them over borders, without a CITES permit. The snowdrop isn't a UK native. They became fashionable in the Victorian era but, due to it being known under several different names, no one knows for sure, when they were first introduced to the UK. The first records of plants in the wild date from 1778 but botanist John Gerard is said to have described the snowdrop in his writings from 1597.

Another garden favourite at this time of the year is the pretty hellebore. In my beach garden I have some stunning hellebore argutifolius! These have flowers the colour of Granny Smith apples, set against spiny, evergreen foliage which appear in winter, and remain on the plants for a long time. It's perfect for growing in a shady border close to the house, where you can appreciate its late-winter beauty.

They are best grown in moist but well-drained soil in dappled shade, that said, mine are fully exposed in the south facing beach garden and have done well for over 10 years now. They dislike being moved once established, so should not be divided. Given the right conditions, it will self-seed quite sufficiently to provide replacements as mine prove only too well.

Starting to come alive in my garden are the fabulous Euphorbia characias subsp. wulfenii. They are an architectural perennial, perfect for adding a real touch of drama to your borders. Its bluish-green foliage looks fresh all year round too, and in early summer it's joined by large, dome-shaped, lime-yellow flowers that tower above it. It's ideal for growing in a sunny border or gravel garden. You can see some evidence that mine in the back garden are beginning to flower. For best results grow in moist but well-drained soil, in full sun. I cut mine down to ground level as the blooms fade but be careful when handling the plant as the thick, white sap can irritate the eyes and skin.

In the beach garden, the two Agave Americana which I planted in the ground back in 2022 are still



Agave americana

doing well. They have survived two full winters now without sustaining any damage from excess wet. They were planted as a bit of a test as I had lost three large specimens before that and learnt at that time, that a good trick was to ensure they are planted at a slight angle, so water will fall away from the crown, making them less susceptible to rotting.

Despite the many grey days at this time of the year the back garden is a joy, all the tall, luscious greenery, phormiums, palms and grisolina hedging looking like a mini jungle despite what the strong winds have thrown at them in recent weeks. You can just see the newly trimmed olive tree behind me, waiting for some new spring growth to pad it out again.

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



Grey days in the garden