

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Ballota



Camellia Yuletide



Euphorbia characias

Rich red flowers make a festive scene in the winter garden

DECEMBER already, the gardening year seems to have just flown by. I shan't be spending too many more hours outdoors this year, my huge collection of Christmas decorations beckon as it is now time to get them all out of the loft and begin to decorate the house for the festive season.

There are signs of Christmas in the garden this week too with the pretty flowers blooming away on the camellia Yuletide. It is well-named for its profusion of rich red flowers in winter. Each crimson bloom boasts a golden crown of stamens at its centre, creating a vibrant festive display.

It will flower from November right through into January, reaching its peak around Christmas, when your garden is most in need of a splash of colour. The glossy evergreen foliage also adds year-round structure to the garden, whether it be planted in acid borders, woodland gardens or a large container, like mine.

It is a superb hardy, specimen shrub that will require virtually no maintenance once established.

I've had mine for over ten years now, bought by a friend who is no longer with us, so it is a nice reminder too.

Chester and I can be seen admiring the pretty spider plant in the garden. Chlorophytum Saundersiae Starlight, or anthericum, is a hardy spider plant. This elegant grass-like perennial forms a dense clump of slender, variegated foliage that shoots upwards before arching gracefully at the tips.

Unlike its better known, house plant relative Starlight is hardy down to -5C, making it suitable for a sheltered spot outdoors.

Throughout summer it produces starry, white flowers that sparkle at the tips of its long stems. It can look simply beautiful in a patio container and fabulous in mixed borders too, where it provides excellent structure and texture. Mine is a stand-alone plant, adjacent to the steps up to the summer house. Back in 2019 it was shortlisted for Chelsea Plant of the Year.

Growing well in the beach garden is a handsome euphorbia which

has upright stems, clothed with whorls of fleshy, glaucous leaves and topped with huge heads of chartreuse-green flowers with bronze "eye" from March to May. The plant looks great too, through the winter, minus the stunning flowers. I've read that the Edwardian garden designer Gertrude Jekyll described this sun-loving, evergreen shrub as "one of the grandest of plants". Euphorbia characias originates from the Mediterranean, where it is found on dry rocky slopes and scrubland, so it is very tolerant of drought once it becomes established. It forms a natural rounded shape, and brings structure and an architectural quality to the garden. A tall mainstay of the traditional herbaceous border, it's equally at home in a contemporary minimalist or gravel garden.

Do be careful when handling the plant as the thick, white sap can irritate the eyes and skin.

I have three clumps in the beach garden, with the one by the front door contrasting well with the fading flowers on the hydrangea behind.

My large collection of garden clutter has now been safely put away for the winter, with just a few pieces remaining in the garden for me to enjoy over the winter months, especially those viewed from the newly decorated garden room, with its lovely French windows.

On a recent garden visit, my eye was caught by the three little ducks for sale, along with many other interesting pieces.

They just looked so perfect to add to the collection of objets d'art back at Driftwood, that I could not resist purchasing them.

For now, they have been carefully put away until spring, in the summer house, with other items from my ever-growing collection.

Another interesting plant growing in the beach garden is Ballota pseudodictamnus, also called false dittany.

It is a small, bushy shrub that thrives in hot, sunny and dry conditions.

It's aided by a covering of felty, silver hairs that reduce water loss. In late summer it produces flowering spears that bear whorls



Chester, Geoff and chlorophytum saundersiae

of small pink flowers. The plant is perfect for growing in sunny gravel gardens like mine, where it will help inhibit weed growth and combine well with plants like bearded irises and phlomis.

For best results, grow in full sun, in a poor, well-drained soil. Mine are on chalk so seem to do really well.

You can prune back very hard in spring, to encourage fresh growth, which has the best colour. I've grown to love it as I've found it is one of the very best foliage plants. It comes from Turkey and has a rounded clumping habit.

The plant is amazingly tactile, so you'll want to go back for more.

It will also work well in a pot and in the garden or as a ground cover, both in part shade full sun

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



The new little ducks