

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Eucalyptus



Fatsia 'spider's web'



Mahonia winter sun

## Beautiful foliage is as important as having those pretty flowers

**L**AST week I shared an image of the stunning mangave moon glow which has shot up an incredibly tall flower stem that is just about to flower and this week, I have an echeveria red sea monster which is doing the self-same thing. This plant is a real gem and is true to its name, it wants to grow big! The leaves are thick, dark green and frilled at the edge, turning bright red with good light. The flower stems are tall (they can grow up to 50-60cm) and are crowned with red/dark pink flowers on the ends. Mine spends the summer in the garden and the winter in the back porch. Even though echeveria prefer bright light, putting them directly into full sun for the summer months can be stressful, as well as causing sunburn. You need to gradually acclimatize them by putting them in an area that gets only morning sun for a few hours a day, and increase it over a week or so until they're in full sun. Try and avoid afternoon sun altogether as the foliage will burn and stress the plant out. In the winter, the brightest window you can supply will be fine.

Two old favourites of mine at this time of the year are mahonia x media winter sun and fatsia japonica spiders web. The former is a medium-sized evergreen shrub of upright growth, with long, spiny, pinnate leaves. Its flowers are small, bright yellow, fragrant, in clusters of erect racemes, followed by blue-black berries. They are great plants for a woodland setting in either a sheltered or exposed situation, with full sun or partial shade. It generally flowers from November through until March. This hardy shrub forms rosettes of sharply toothed leaves up to 45cm long, with glossy, bottle green leaflets that are similar in appearance to holly leaves. It is the perfect architectural shrub for a shady spot providing a visual delight all year round. Mine sits behind some tall railway sleepers reaching for the sky.

The latter is a bushy, evergreen shrub growing up to 2m tall. Its dark-green leaves are heavily-speckled with white, particularly

at the edges, but the white variegation can sometimes spread across the whole leaf. Terminal clusters of white flowers are produced at this time of year and are followed by black berries. They grow best in partial shade, in moist but well-drained soil with protection from cold drying winds; they also can tolerate full shade as well. That said, I have one that is in perhaps more sun than it should be but is doing well. Also known as Japanese aralia, it is prized for its glossy palmate foliage that brings a lush, tropical feel to planting schemes. Fatsia 'spider's web' is a particularly intriguing variety with speckled markings that spread inwards from the outermost edges. The overall effect is an unusual, frosted appearance and despite its exotic looks, this evergreen shrub is perfectly hardy and a superb choice for those challenging, shaded positions.

A plant I've got growing in the beach garden is senecio cineraria 'silver dust', technically it is a tender shrub, usually grown as a half-hardy annual foliage plant. I've managed to keep mine going for several years now outdoors. Its young leaves are slightly lobed, a bit like oak leaves, but as the plants mature, they become deeply cut, much paler in colour and are covered in a silvery grey fleece. It's perfect for growing at the front of a border, and also as part of a container display. It works particularly well with bold-coloured plants, with which its foliage contrasts well. For best results grow in moist but well-drained soil in full sun. The experts say, to encourage new basal growth, flowering should be prevented by regularly removing lengthening stems. I tend to leave the flowers for their gorgeous colour! This is a versatile foliage plant with great drought and wind tolerance.

A new plant recently purchased for the new pond patio area is a eucalyptus gunnii. Only a few eucalyptus species are reliably hardy and this is the most popular. Like many eucalyptus, it's grown mostly for its lush, rounded juvenile foliage. It can be grown in moist but well-drained



Geoff with a echeveria red sea monster which likes bright light

soil in a sheltered site. The experts advise pruning hard annually, to maintain its small habit and juvenile foliage.

Unlike many of its vigorous cousins, this compact cedar gum, as it's also known, has a naturally compact and bushy growth habit. The blue-grey foliage is curiously rounded and reflects the light with its silvery hues, adding evergreen colour and interest to mixed borders. It associates beautifully silver-leaved shrubs and blue-flowered perennials, and is prized by florists for adding to flower arrangements. Eucalyptus gunnii is exceptionally hardy, coping with temperatures as low as -20C and is perfect for smaller gardens where most Eucalyptus plants would prove unmanageable.

Read more of Geoff's garden at [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk)



Senecio cineraria 'silver dust'