

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Dahlias, dried flowers and holly berries

EARLIER in the month we had a week away in Dorset, staying in a very pretty old house on three levels, with a beautiful garden.

One of our days out was to see the amazing Forde Abbey, set on the borders of both Dorset and Somerset. I had never been before and loved the garden.

It is home to the highest, powered fountain in the country and the award-winning gardens include topiary-lined vistas, colourful herbaceous borders, an arboretum, and a bog garden, which together with swathes of early Spring bulbs and camellias provide all year-round interest. It was designed to incorporate both the formal and informal aspects of garden design, the straight lines give way to meandering pathways the further you head away from the house, with plenty of benches and seating to admire the views along the way. Surprisingly, there was still plenty of colour in the borders, as you can see behind me in the image above.

I was inspired to buy three new plants in the nursery there too! Pictured, you can see the two dahlias, 'Honka Red' and 'Karma Bon Bini' and the new fuchsia *magellanica*, 'Arauco'. The Honka Red is a green-leaved cultivar growing to around 70cm tall with scarlet-red, incurved florets surrounding contrasting yellow eyes, with each flowerhead up to 13cm across. The Karma Bon Bini, you can see one of the flowers on the new plant, grows to 90cm high, with green leaves and cactus flowers, achieving 10-15cm across and are rich red with yellow towards the centre from summer to autumn. I look forward to planting them out and seeing the results next year!

The Arauco is a popular flowering shrub, perfect for coastal or milder regions of the UK. It produces distinctive tri-coloured flowers from June to October, with red and white outer sepals contrasting against deep purple inner petals. Its toothed, dark green leaves form a bushy, upright habit, and in milder UK



Geoff and flower beds at Forde Abbey. Images: Geoff Stonebanks

areas, it may remain semi-evergreen. The plant thrives in borders, containers, or as informal hedging, providing a long season of colour with minimal maintenance once established. It will be perfect for adding interest with its slender, pendant blooms or bringing a unique charm to my summer and autumn displays in 2027 and beyond.

In the restaurant at Forde Abbey there were some incredible displays of dried flowers that had been beautifully strung, forming some attractive room dividers from waist height to the ceiling as you can see in the image. There were three beautiful panels created across the centre of the room and they made a real impact. I dare not think of the

amount of time and dedication that went into creating them, but it was clearly well worth it.

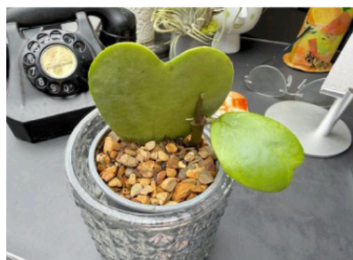
Hoya kerrii, or the Sweetheart or Heart Plant, is famous for its thick, succulent leaves shaped like perfect little hearts. Charming as a single-leaf novelty or grown on as a full trailing vine, it's both a beloved gift and a collector's plant. I have had mine for quite a few years now and was quite taken aback when it started to produce a shoot from the compost that has now formed a new plant leaf. The plant is native to Southeast Asia, including Thailand and Indonesia, where it grows as an epiphyte in warm, humid tropical forest. This heart-shaped succulent is not only irresistibly cute but also in-

credibly easy to care for, making it ideal for both seasoned plant lovers and complete beginners. It needs only a little water every so often, so just be careful not to overwater. With the right care, it will stay looking fabulous for months, or even years, making it a long-lasting and meaningful plant gift, often given for Valentine's Day. I shall be cutting off the new growth and forming a new plant.

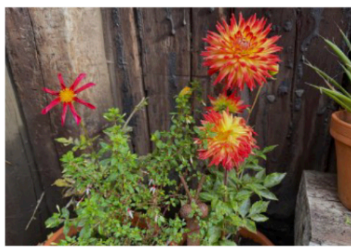
On the left of the garden, I have a couple of large holly bushes that form part of the hedging. This year there are so many berries that have appeared, far more than usual and they are just starting to turn bright red. According to folklore this used to be a sign that a hard winter

was to follow. That said, research shows there is no clear logic to this, as it is the Spring weather that determines whether there are insects around for the flowers to be pollinated, plus sun and warmth in early autumn to help the berries to ripen. The berries are particularly plump and abundant this year. We'll have to wait and see if the old wife's tale is true or not over the next few months. Holly has been used to decorate homes for centuries and its evergreen leaves, with their prickles around the entrance to the house were thought to stop 'evil forces' entering too.

Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or follow both him and the garden on social media.



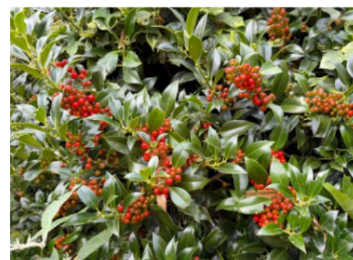
Hoya kerrii



Magelliana araucu, dahlia karma bon bini and dahlia Honka red



Dried flower screen divider at Forde Abbey



Holly berries