

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Fabulous plant will sustain bees and butterflies into autumn

A FABULOUS staple plant in my garden, both front and rear, is the wonderful *verbena bonariensis*. Tightly packed clusters of lilac-purple flowers emerge on tall, stiff, branching stems from June right through to September.

This stylish perennial has been enjoying a resurgence of interest in recent years.

It is billed as perfect for a sheltered, sunny, well-drained spot. Its open, transparent shape means that it can easily be used at the front or middle of the border despite its height.

That said it grows really well in my exposed beach garden too. Despite being struck by strong winds through the summer months, they manage to stand tall, looking very elegant, swaying in the breeze.

This plant will help to sustain bees and butterflies into autumn with its tall wiry stems of purple flowers. It can make a good filler too, because the upright stems will support neighbouring plants. It self-seeds beautifully as shown by those growing in the pots beneath my two standard olive trees that found their own way there.

Another *verbena*, much talked about by visitors to the garden is *verbena polaris*.

This gorgeous plant is a compact, low-growing perennial with attractive, three-branched candelabras of small pale lilac flowers over a long blooming season.

They grow best in full sun on well-drained soil so are perfect on the chalk here at Driftwood.

They shine from early summer right through to the first frosts.

Their luminous blossoms rise above dense clumps of rigid, lanceolate, dark green leaves.

I planted those pictured in my beach garden back in 2012 and despite its exposed location they never fail to dazzle each year.

This weekend, there are still a couple of gardens you could visit with the National Garden Scheme.

South Grange is a drive over to the west of the county, in Quickbourne Lane in Northiam.

Open both today and tomorrow, with entry by donation.

The large garden has a wide variety of trees, shrubs, grasses and perennials arranged into a complex garden display for year-round colour.

There is a small area of woodland to

explore too.

The garden has been planted with the emphasis of attracting insects and the owners try to maintain nectar and pollen supplies, along with varied habitats for most of the creatures they share the garden with.

It opens from 11am to 5pm both days, September 3 and 4.

A complete contrast, just north of the city, five town gardens open their garden gates in East Grinstead on Sunday. Combined entry here is £6 between 1pm and 5pm. Described as a series of gardens to lift your spirits and make you smile, you'll see established plots and fairly new ones like 35 Blount Avenue, pictured bottom right.

Here, garden owner Nicki Conlon, tells us "dahlia time is really getting going now. One of my favourites is dahlia cafe au lait, which is putting on a great display now in my front garden".

She goes on to say: "There will be lots more dahlias and pops of colour to be seen throughout the borders on the open day on Sunday, September 4." Sounds like a great reason to visit.

Full details on all the gardens opening can be found at www.ngs.org.uk

Looking rather elegant in a container in the garden this week is the beautiful black flower of calla lily "Odessa" surrounded by its equally elegant, arrow-shaped green foliage, spotted with white.

The flowers are striking, almost black-purple and are on show for weeks from summer through to the autumn.

They can grow up to 60cm tall and prefer to be planted in full sun in moist soil.

They can work well as marginal plants around the pond too.

Beware though as they are toxic to pets so place them carefully. They are native to South Africa and are relatively easy to grow with very little effort.

What could be more exotic than this black calla in all its dusky glory?

It makes a real statement in so give it a prominent place in garden.

Don't forget to cut a few long-lasting blooms to add drama to cut flower arrangements as well.

Many years ago, a friend gave me a clump of *persicaria affinis* which is looking wonderful in the garden at the moment.

It is a creeping, mat-forming perennial, with narrow green leaves and lollipop spikes of pale pink flowers.



Top row from left, black calla lily; *persicaria*; *polaris*. Above, Geoff and *verbena bonariensis* and, right, dahlia cafe au lait

Semi-evergreen, it makes a fine choice for using as ground cover in a mixed herbaceous border; and its blooms are popular with pollinators.

They grow best in full sun to partial shade, in moisture retentive soil and remember to cut back after flowering and divide congested clumps every three years.

It can be a bit of a thug but the flowers are very pretty and look perfect swaying in the breeze too.

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

