

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Hellebore argutifolius



Miscanthus



Winter sunrise over the beach garden

Vintage wooden bear is one of my favourite new additions

WELL, that's it for another year, the shortest day is a couple of weeks behind us now and spring will be here before we know it. I daresay we will have a few cold spells before then but the temperatures over the last few weeks have been incredibly mild for the depths of winter.

Have you made any New Year resolutions about your gardening for the year? I can't honestly say I have, just more of the same coming up for me I reckon.

We recently had the most stunning sunrise over the beach garden. It really set the sky alight and made the front garden look magical. The tamarisk tree looked quite amazing set against the deep orange sky.

Looking really pretty in the beach garden this week are the beautiful hellebores. Their lime green, fluorescent colouring really stands out against the stunning dark green leaves. This is argutifolius and it has been planted in the gravel now for about 12 years and flowers religiously each year in winter and flowers 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 or, as I have done, planted it in gravel at the front of the house. It is best grown in moist but well-drained soil in dappled shade. Helleborus argutifolius dislikes being moved once established so should not be divided.

Given the right conditions though it will self-seed quite sufficiently to provide replacements, which mine do regularly each year, creating many new plants.

A wonderful species of plant to have around the garden through the winter months are grasses. I have a large selection, throughout the garden at Driftwood. One that is looking particularly grand at the moment is the miscanthus

or elephant grass. Miscanthus are reliable grasses that provide interest over a very long period. Fountains of foliage grow up in early summer and bear plumes of white or pink flowers in late summer. As winter approaches, these bleach into shades of a pretty biscuity brown as you can see. Tall cultivars suit the back of borders and smaller cultivars mingle well in beds with plants with bold, colourful flowers. Maybe a plant to add, belatedly, to your New Year's resolutions for your garden.

I sincerely hope you, like me, received a number of Christmas gifts that can be used or placed in the garden. A real favourite of mine this year was a wonderful vintage carved bear on two metal stakes, bought for me by my mother. It has clearly seen better days, but for me that is half its attraction. I love it. Later in the year I will find it the perfect home in the back garden to show it off to its very best.

Without fail, at this time of year, all the garden sculpture really comes into its own.

Close to the central steps is the large, rusty metal sphere that looks great in the summer with plants bursting through it but is equally impressive in the winter as a stand-alone feature, even more so if we get a hint of frost sitting on its frame.

The tall, thin wooden feature really stands out in the winter too, not forgetting the new piece, the stainless-steel fish, whose head peeps over the foliage.

The stained-glass piece on the left also offers a splash of colour and comes alive if we get sun shining through it too.

This time of year, it can be really difficult to get jobs completed in the garden, due to the cold and the ground being so hard. Take care, if you have a pond with fish, it is important to stop it freezing over and keep them free from harm. An ideal way to do this is to float a ball in the water, this will help prevent it from totally freezing over and allow oxygen into the



Geoff in the winter garden

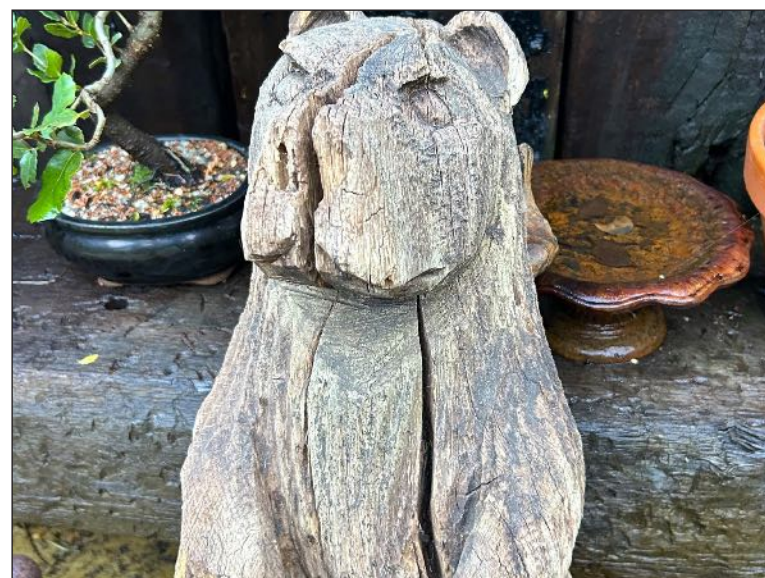
water. It is not advisable to smash the ice on the pond, as the shockwaves can damage the fish.

If your pond is frozen over, then one way to break the ice is to place a warm pan on the surface, which will gently melt the ice.

I've just engaged a local landscaper to come and give the grass bank at the front of the house its annual trim.

It was the only area of grass I was not able to remove when all the lawns were taken out. It is quite steep, but once cut back it will flourish for the rest of the year with many wild flowers popping up and blending in with the different grass growing there too.

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



The bear gift from mother