

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Euphorbia/hydrangea mix



Looking after my new monkey puzzle tree



The central area looks good, brimming with hardy palms

## Amazing plants to be seen on visit to West Dean gardens

**W**E recently had a few days away, staying not far from West Dean gardens and were lucky enough to visit on an extremely cold, but very sunny day.

It had been a while since our last visit and without doubt, my favourite part was walking through the several large greenhouses. What I would give for just one of them, somehow fitted into my own plot. There were many fine succulents and delicate specimens on show. My favourite one was the temperate greenhouse pictured, which had an amazing collection of plants. It was quite nice to step inside out of the cold too!

A new addition to my collection of plants at Driftwood is a small monkey puzzle tree, purchased a couple of weeks ago. The monkey puzzle tree, or Araucaria Araucana to give it its proper name, is a large evergreen tree with a distinctive shape. Frequently seen with horizontal branches which are covered in spirals of sharp, triangular leaves. When mature, the trees produce large cones at the tips of the branches. It is also known as the Chile pine, as it is native to both Chile and Argentina. The tree dates back 200 million years, which means it was around in the dinosaur era. It's thought the sharp leaves protected the tree from being eaten by dinosaurs and other long-extinct animals. The tree was apparently introduced to the UK at the end of the 18th century and was a favourite with the Victorians. It's thought it got its common name when a guest saw a tree at a country estate in Cornwall and remarked that it would be a 'puzzler' even for a monkey to climb. The tree is now classed as an endangered species in its native habitat, as human interference, in the form of heavy logging, forest fires and grazing from introduced animals has taken a heavy toll on the trees. It can take 40 years for the tree to produce seeds. My baby is currently in a large pot in the garden.

In the front garden, to the left of the front door, is a bed containing a hydrangea and a large euphorbia. The former was already in the garden when we moved in 20 years ago. Euphorbia characias subsp. wulfenii is an architectural grand perennial, perfect for adding a touch of real drama to your garden borders. I first saw it planted en masse at Whitstable Castle a few years ago and fell in love with it. Its bluish-green foliage looks fresh all year round, and in early summer it's joined by large, dome-shaped, lime-yellow flowers that tower above it. It's ideal for growing in a sunny border or gravel garden. For best results they are best grown in moist but well-drained soil, in full sun. It is best to cut down the flower stems to ground level as the blooms fade. Do remember to take care when handling the plant, as the thick, white sap can irritate the eyes and skin.

You can see me, stood in the beach garden at the front of the house, which still looks pretty good for December. The mixed planting surrounding the black rowing boat really sets it off as a great garden feature. That, coupled with the marine artifacts, creates a great seaside tableau to look out on from the front porch.

In the back garden, the central area, brimming with a number of hardy palms, equally looks good at this time of the year, also helped with the rusty metal sculpture around.

As the temperatures begin to plummet, have you started to think about feeding the birds through the winter months? The added bonus in feeding is that it allows you to get really close to some of Sussex's most amazing wildlife. You might think great tits, robins and finches are nothing to shout about, but the more you look, the more you see their fantastic colours and interesting behaviours. We can all benefit from sharing our lives a little bit more with wildlife. In winter food is hard for them to find, so



Beach garden is looking pretty good still

supplementing a bird's natural food can be essential to their survival. I try to remember to check my feeders daily through the colder months and am always amazed by the number of birds that swoop down for dinner.

I opted again to have a large, real Christmas tree this year, a six feet tall Korean fir which I have prepared and left standing out in the garden for a few days before bringing inside to decorate for the festive season. I've not had a Korean fir before but it has a great shape and should not drop too many needles. It looks beautiful now lit and decorated in the dining room, resplendent with red decorations and tinsel.

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



I'd love a greenhouse like this one at West Dean gardens