

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Powering up in time for spring

It's March already and spring is around the corner, along with longer days, after the clocks go forward at the end of the month.

It's been a busy time, with me trying to complete all the heavy-duty power washing, across both the front and back gardens. It's certainly no easy feat the older you get, especially gripping the hand tool to engage the pressure with my hands. This year I have had to resort to completing the task in stages, usually a couple of hours a day. It is certainly a worthwhile task, as you can see from the image. The main problem is that it is a very messy task with water spraying everywhere. The impact is especially noticeable on the newer, lighter-coloured slabs, at the rear of the house. The hardest problem for me now is having to move all the large containers to get underneath them and behind. Thankfully it is almost completed for another year!

Throughout the back garden, I have quite a lot of white marine rope that used to tie the ferry up in Newhaven. It gets so grey and dirty through the year, but it too benefits from a power wash as you can see, bringing it back to a gleaming white again. It really adds to the coastal feel and looks great set against both the gravel and the planting.

Getting ready and waiting in the heated greenhouse are the many succulents, stored in there for the winter months. The echeveria lipstick looks particularly nice and has a couple of flower heads forming on it. The plant is a cultivar of *Echeveria agavoides*, also known as red edge echeveria. *Echeveria agavoides* 'Lipstick' is a lovely slim-leaved beauty. It is a slow-growing succulent but can reach large sizes. The leaves are almost hand-painted in red to show off a fierce-looking specimen. As it ages, the leaves only become covered more in the red colouring to make it almost look as though it has been dipped into it. A sturdy plant that looks great in a succulent bowl or bed to add texture. Alternatively, on



Geoff power cleaning. Pictures: Geoff Stonebanks

its own on a container to stand out.

Amongst the many aeoniums stored there, too, are several that are flowering. Aeoniums are fleshy, succulent plants native to Madeira, the Canary Islands and North Africa. They are members of the *Crassulaceae* family and have rosettes of glossy, waxy leaves and range in height from a few centimetres to up to a metre. In late winter or spring, they may produce these clusters of tiny flowers as shown. They are mostly grown for their distinctive, unusual shapes and foliage that comes in shades of green or purple-black or variegated in shades of white, yellow and red. Aeoniums make excellent, low-maintenance

house plants that need very little care. They thrive on neglect, and actually allowing the soil to dry out in between watering will make the colours more vibrant and the plant stronger. They look great grown with other succulents or cacti that thrive in similar growing conditions. They can also be grown outdoors in summer, in a pot with summer bedding plants or in a sunny, well-drained border. All mine will be relocated to the garden through late April and May, ready for my first visitors on June 1. The main growing season for aeoniums is spring and autumn, when the temperature and light levels are perfect for their growth. They often go dormant in hot periods of the

summer, and you will notice the rosettes becoming tighter with the outer leaves drying and dropping off. This is perfectly normal, and they will need less water as they can live off the water and nutrients stored in the leaves and stems.

Also pictured are the fresh new shoots on my *Sorbaria sorbifolia* 'Sem'. This is a shrub with a big personality and one that changes its outfit several times throughout the year. In spring, it bursts into life with fern-like leaves, flushed in shades of pink, bronze and fresh lime. By summer, the foliage mellows to a soft green, perfectly setting off its upright spires of tiny white flowers that seem to sparkle in the sunlight. Come

autumn, sorbaria 'Sem' closes the season in a blaze of warm reds and coppers, a final encore before winter's rest. Compact yet full of presence, it's a plant that rewards any gardener who appreciates subtle drama over loud performance. The plant is a reliable and low-maintenance choice for borders, slopes, naturalistic planting schemes, or large containers like mine! It thrives in well-drained soil and good light and has a tidy habit and upright stems. It is hardy and unfussy. Sorbaria 'Sem' offers year-round visual interest with barely a hint of neediness.

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



Sorbaria sem sorbifolia



Echeveria lipstick flowering



Marine rope comes up well



Aeonium flowering in the greenhouse