

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Elephant's ears blooming in the garden



Camellia William Bartlett is slowly flowering



Sedum 'Herbstfreude' forms a clump, with pink blooms

It's worth a visit to Bates Green Garden now spring is in the air

THIS Sunday you can opt to visit a pretty garden open for the National Garden Scheme in Arlington. Bates Green Garden in Tye Hill Road, opens tomorrow, March 9, from 10.30am to 3.30pm with entry £7 and children £3.50. This tranquil garden provides interest throughout the varied seasons. Its woodland garden has been created around a majestic oak tree. There is a colour themed middle garden plus courtyard gardens brimming with seasonal container displays. The front garden is a spring joy with narcissi, primroses and violets. Don't miss the wildlife pond and wildflower meadow all gardened for nature and wildlife. Spring visitors can walk through a wild daffodil glade, leading to the 24-acre ancient oak wood, home of the Arlington Bluebell Walk. Beatons Wood is managed for conservation and diversity. You can see a great image taken by John Glover of the cyclamen growing at Bates Green. Full details at www.ngs.org.uk

We're all in the pink in the garden at Driftwood this week! Bursting with pretty pink flowers is the large sprawling bergenia or Elephant's Ears, in the beach garden. Bergenias are evergreen herbaceous perennials with distinctive glossy, rounded leaves. They have often traditionally been consigned to tricky, shady areas of the garden where not much else will grow, but they're actually versatile plants that deserve a prominent spot in your garden. Their spring flowers, held on short stems and in shades of magenta, pale pink or white, look excellent with spring bulbs and provide early nectar for pollinating insects. They are a very low maintenance, drought-resistant plant and seem to do well in a wide range of soils, including poor, dry soils and clay. They also grow well in sun or shade, mine are on chalk, in my gravel garden, in full sun.

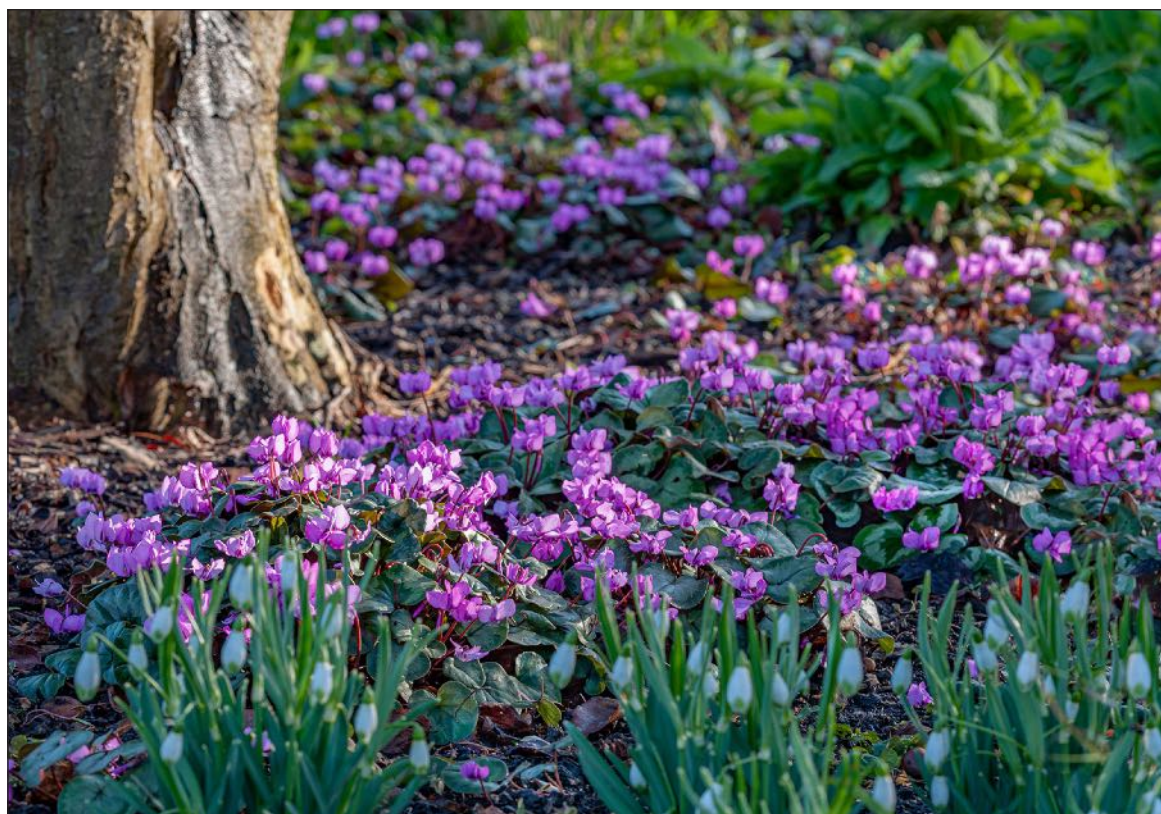
Meanwhile at the back, the stunning flowers on the camellia William Bartlett are slowly appearing. This is a handsome tidy evergreen shrub that adds real class to any garden and brings much needed floral colour as we come out of the winter months. The plants have double formed flowers that are light pink but flecked with darker pink, appearing from March through to April and will be generously distributed about the plant's frame growing at the apex of its many branches. This flower is a special treat but let's not forget the

glossy oval leaves which lift any mixed border setting and offsets any lower colourful planting that may surround it. Mine is growing in a large container on a north facing wall, in shade at the back of the house and has done well over the last 10 years. Camellia can grow in shady conditions and make great understory to larger trees but prefer a slightly acidic soil that has plenty of organic matter but if your conditions are not right then one grown in a container, sat on a patio makes for an impressive sight. A very versatile plant that will happily fit into a woodland, cottage or formal landscape.

Sedum are a true magnet for butterflies in the garden, not to mention being reliable, hardy and always colourful. Sedum 'Herbstfreude' forms a clump, with drought tolerant, fleshy foliage, and pink autumn blooms. They are most at home in hot, sunny borders, and require zero maintenance, so are ideal for beginners. Their autumn flowering period is useful for extending the season of interest in the garden. You can see mine beginning to throw up fresh shoots. First the early rosettes of fleshy slightly toothed grey-green leaves appear, then large heads of waxy buds exactly the same colour as the leaves, next opening to rich pink starry flowers which deepen to brick red, and finally warm brown seedheads. Crowns need dividing occasionally and the plant benefits from a 'Chelsea chop' annually to produce best results. Bees love this, but butterflies are not so keen.

I never seem to tire of appreciating the lovely railway sleeper backed patio behind the house. It never fails to look good whatever the season. You can see from the picture it retains a sense of beauty even in the depths of winter with a few selected containers spread around to soften the impact of the dark sleepers. The square, teak table, over 30 years old now helps set the scene too and it is a great place to display some of my bonsai trees through the winter months. You can see a miniature greenhouse on the far bench housing three more delicate plants.

- If there are any club secretaries reading this, I have just written a brand new garden talk on the subject of my succulent obsession, which is now available for me to deliver to horticultural societies or garden clubs in their 2025/26 booking schedule or sooner. If interested email me at

Cyclamen coum flowering around the base of a tree *Image: John Glover*

geoffstonebanks@gmail.com for more details.

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

- *Geoff's garden, Driftwood has appeared twice on BBC2 Gardeners' World, most recently in March 2024. Featured in The Sunday Times in August 2024 and was a finalist in Gardeners' World Magazine Best Small Space. Read over 240, 5-star reviews, on TripAdvisor. Read all about Geoff's trips to Buckingham Palace and Royal Garden Party in 2018 and his work for the community, plus being named a Coronation Champion and third visit to Buckingham Palace in 2023.*

- Pre-book a 2025 garden visit or visit the garden website. Read all Geoff's published writing for various garden media.



Geoff and a winter dressed patio