

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Brightening up our gardens

It's very hard to believe that we have only got just over six weeks until Christmas, where has the year gone?

Despite the varied weather we have been having, the garden is still looking quite good for this time of the year! A beautiful favourite of mine, growing in many places around my garden, but pictured in the beach garden at the front of the house is *erigeron karvinskianus* or Mexican fleabane.

It is a charming slender plant native to Mexico, but has established itself in many Mediterranean areas and dry gardens throughout the UK. I particularly love it creeping down the sides of stone or brick steps or tucked in wall crevices, where it both seeds itself and also spreads slowly with its rhizomatous roots. It is best grown in well-drained soil in full sun and can easily be raised from seed, which may be scattered in the cracks between paving stones or mixed with a little clay and pressed into hollowed mortar joints in walls. I can't say I have tried that myself. I love the fact that it flowers for so long and the range of colours across the plant are really attractive.

Another plant that I have grown to love in recent years is *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *Wulfenii*. It is an architectural perennial, perfect for adding a touch of real drama to the garden. It has gorgeous bluish-green foliage which looks fresh all year round, and in early summer it's joined by large, dome-shaped, lime-yellow flowers that tower above it. You can see mine pictured by the front door of the house. It's ideal for growing in a sunny border or gravel garden, perfect from my pretty beach garden. For best results, grow in moist but well-drained soil, in full sun. It is recommended to cut down the flower stems to ground level as the blooms fade and I would certainly recommend wearing protective gloves when handling the plant as the thick, white sap can irritate the eyes and skin.

Meanwhile, in the back porch I have carefully arranged a selec-



Geoff and a fatsia

tion of the smaller succulents that normally dress the garden through the summer months. Several of the small *echeveria* are throwing up their pretty flowers as you can see. The flowering process of *echeveria* plants is a fascinating natural phenomenon that typically occurs during spring and summer months in the UK. These succulents produce tall stems which can grow up to 30 cm in height, featuring clusters of bell-shaped flowers in stunning shades of orange, pink, or yellow. The blooming period serves as an essential part of the plant's life cycle, allowing for reproduction and indicating that your succulent is mature and healthy. However, during the blooming phase, the plant chan-

nels significant energy into flower production, which can last anywhere from several weeks to a few months. This process demonstrates the plant's vitality but also requires careful consideration of its overall health and growing conditions. I never cut mine off allowing them to flower and remove the stem once flowering is complete.

In the main image, you can see me standing next to a pretty *fatsia*, called spider's web. Japanese *Aralia*, to call it by its correct name, is prized for its glossy palmate foliage that brings a lush, tropical feel to planting schemes. 'Spiders Web' is a particularly intriguing variety with speckled markings that spread inwards from the outermost edges.

The overall effect is an unusual, frosted appearance. Despite its exotic looks, this evergreen shrub is perfectly hardy and a superb choice for those challenging, shaded spots in the garden.

Clusters of globular white flowers appear in autumn, which are then followed by black berries. You can see the amazing flower head on a much larger specimen of Japanese *aralia* in the back garden, which is growing in a large container on the north facing wall at the back of the house. They can be quite impressive when fully emerged.

The shorter days and colder weather are really starting to hit the time in the garden now. Why not think about creating a colourful pot to help brighten those

winter days when you look out into the garden or onto the patio/balcony? There are many different plants you can use to create a wonderfully seasonal hardy container. Your local garden centre should have a good range of plants to choose from. There are many different containers you can choose from but try and ensure it is roomy and pick a mixture of evergreen shrubs, conifers, hardy ferns, bedding or even some hardy herbs too. A trick to take your pot through to spring too, is to plant some tulips deep in the soil too, to pop up unexpectedly next year.

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



echeveria



euphorbia



fatsia flowers



erigeron