

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Driftwood looking lovely, also right

Be confident... and you might be able to create a winner too

THIS week I celebrate the tenth anniversary of having scored the gardening double whammy, back in 2012. That summer, my mother had said to me, why don't I enter the Daily Mail national garden competition. To be honest I didn't see the point. What chance did a small coastal garden in Sussex stand of winning a national competition? After some careful thought and selecting eight of my own images to send off, I decided to post them off, with no expectation whatsoever.

You can imagine my shock, a few weeks later, to receive a phone call, saying that my garden had been placed in the final 12 of the competition. The judges arranged to come and visit Driftwood, along with the other 11 gardens and within a few days, I was duly notified that we had made the final four of the competition, out of over 2500 gardens nationwide.

I didn't actually win that year, but it was no mean feat to have been selected as one of the four finalists and awarded with a much-coveted blue plaque to display in the garden. Inspired by this achievement, I saw another national competition advertised on social media and decided to try my luck again. I entered the Garden News Magazine Gardener of the Year awards 2012, in the small garden category. Once again, the garden got selected to be visited by the judges. On this occasion though, there was no pre-determined date for the judging, I was notified that the judges could arrive any time throughout a three-week period in August. This obviously required me to ensure the garden was looking its best every day until they arrived.

I was up at the crack of dawn each day making sure it looked its best and finally, after about eight days, they rolled up early one morning and seemed suitably impressed. The results were finally confirmed in the magazine in mid-September 2012, with a three-page feature.

Amazingly, Driftwood won outright and I was crowned Gardener Of The Year 2012 in the small garden section. I was presented with a cut glass vase suitably inscribed and I had a twin plaque made to match the Daily Mail one, to mark the occasion and display the two together for visitors to see.

The clear moral of this tale is to never underestimate what you are capable of. In the spring of 2012, I had no realisation of how good I might be at creating an award-winning garden, by the autumn of that year I was suitably reassured that I was. So, I always encourage visitors to never question what they are capable of, always telling them to just go for it.

Those readers who have visited Driftwood in recent years will soon realise just how much the plot has changed since those images were taken in 2012. The main difference being the growth upwards. Much of the same structure still exists today, excepting the new patio area created last autumn. All the planting has certainly filled out in the intervening years, notably the large butia capita palm in the centre of the plot, which is now over 20ft tall.

I suppose the one thing I learnt, above all, with these successes, was not to doubt my own ability in the garden. While I still don't consider myself an "expert" gardener, I am very knowledgeable about my own plot and what can be grown.

As far as the National Garden Scheme is concerned, we are fast approaching the end of the 2022 open garden season. There are however a couple of plots you could visit next week. The first is the Old Vicarage, The Street in Washington, which will open between 10.30am and 4pm on Thursday, October 13, with entry £7. You will, however, need to pre-book your visiting slot via the web site before arriving. There are 3.5 acres of garden to see with lovely tea and cakes to enjoy. The front is formally laid out with topiary and contemporary water feature while the back has mature trees



Geoff with his prizes

from the 19th century and uninterrupted views of the North Downs. There is also a wonderful Japanese garden with a waterfall and pond leading to a large copse, stream and treehouse.

The second is Peelers Retreat at 70 Ford Road in Arundel. It opens on Tuesday, October 11, from 2pm to 5pm with entry £5. You can see a stunning garden with imaginative woodland sculptures and a flare for the unusual. This inspirational space is a delight in which to sit and relax, enjoying delicious teas too. There are interlocking beds packed with year-round interest.

Read more of both these gardens at www.ngs.org.uk and Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk

www.gardennewsmagazine.co.uk

GardenNews

Everything you need to know in the garden this week

1ST

2ND

3RD

Best small garden
 1 GEOFF STONEBANKS
 Seaford, East Sussex
 2 FABRICE ARU
 Chigwell, Essex
 3 JANE KEMP
 Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

JUDGE'S COMMENTS
 "Small gardens can be a challenge trying to fit in everything you want. They're even more of a challenge when they're on a slope, making them look even smaller. But Geoff Stonebanks has created something special, filling his garden with a huge range of plants without making the garden look cramped. Individual sculptures and the results of Geoff's beachcombing (he lives close to the sea) equal a coastal haven with its own distinctive personality."

Geoff in Garden News