

# GEOFF STONEBANKS

## The Driftwood Garden Diary



### Pretty winter plants brave cold weather

**A**S the new year moves forward, despite the cold weather, as seen in my garden recently with the frosts, it won't be long before gardens start to open again for the National Garden Scheme.

Did you know that 2025 was another landmark year for the charity? They were able to donate a record £3.8 million from funds gathered at garden openings throughout the year.

These donations helped thousands of people living with cancer, Parkinson's, poor mental health, or the pressures of unpaid caring, by supporting the nurses, health professionals and care workers who care for them. Across Sussex, that contribution amounted to a grand total of £380K, £50K up on 2024, meaning Sussex was, once again, the highest grossing county in the country.

Readers might like to know of one early opener for 2026. 5 Whitehams Close in Cuckfield has 3 open dates this month, the 26th, 28th and 30th.

All dates from 10.30 to 3.30 with entrance £9, inclusive of refreshments. Pre-booking however is essential with all the contact details on the web site or phone 01444 473520 or email [shirley.carmannmartin@ngs.org.uk](mailto:shirley.carmannmartin@ngs.org.uk).

Garden owner Shirley has collected many single and double snowdrops, hellebores, bulbs and other winter treasures, some not widely known. It is a sheltered garden so there are flowers to enjoy in January and early February. The garden will continue its openings through February too on the 2nd, 4th, 10th, 12th, 14th, 17th and 18th. Details of this and other openings at [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)

A pretty plant in the garden at the moment is the winter jasmine. Winter jasmine is a popu-

lar and reliable shrub, valued for its cheery, bright yellow flowers, which appear on bare stems. The hardiest of the jasmines, unlike others, its blooms are unscented, but they make up for this by appearing very early in the season – sometimes as early as January. In its native China, winter jasmine is often called 'Yingchun' which means 'flower that welcomes spring'. It is easy to grow and care for and is usually grown as a climber trained against sunny walls using galvanised wires. It is best grown in well-drained soil in full sun. If growing against a wall or fence, train the stems up a trellis or wires, and prune regularly to prevent bald patches appearing. It also looks great growing over a low hanging wall or in a large pot, where its stems can trail over the sides, to beautiful effect. Its bright yellow blooms brighten the dull winter months from December to March.

One of my favourite echeveria is a pretty one called Lipstick. *Echeveria agavooides 'Lipstick'* is a lovely slim leafed 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. It is a sturdy plant that looks great in a succulent bowl or bed to add texture. You can see mine makes a great feature plant too, it is currently in the heated greenhouse for the winter. Water thoroughly, then allow the soil to completely dry before watering again. In active growth, this may be every 1–2 weeks, depending on conditions. In cooler months or dormancy, reduce or stop watering to prevent rot.

A much talked about small tree



Fresh garden mornings



Lipstick in greenhouse

in the garden is the interesting *Sciadopitys verticillata*. It is possibly the cutest pine on the planet when young, with unique, beautifully arranged graceful whorls of needles radiating from around the branches, arrayed like umbrella spokes, perhaps the source of its common name 'Japanese Umbrel-

la Pine'. Each needle grows initially upright, yet gracefully curving outwards from the stem giving their circular array a brush-like appearance. As they mature, they droop elegantly downwards, being somewhat reminiscent of a sea anemone. I've had mine for about four years now, growing in a large

container behind the house.

Its youthful character may be enjoyed for many years due to its slow growth, while it attains a small shrub size until it becomes a 2–3m tall plant, over a period of 10 or 20 years. As the plant's sheer mass of foliage, and developing tree-like form become evident, these aspects of the species become its foremost qualities, bestowing a serene and ancient appearance. The maturing trunk begins to reveal its rich cinnamon red coloured bark, peeling, with vertical fissures, contributing to the tree's rarefied countenance.

Last autumn, I took a few cuttings from my trailing fuchsias. Some of those growing last summer seemed to be on their last legs, so these three new ones will replace them in the spring, in the wall pots behind the house. You can see they are doing really well.

Read more of Geoff's garden at [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk) or follow him and the garden on social media.



Winter jasmine



Fuchsia cuttings



Japanese umbrella pine