

The Driftwood Garden Diary

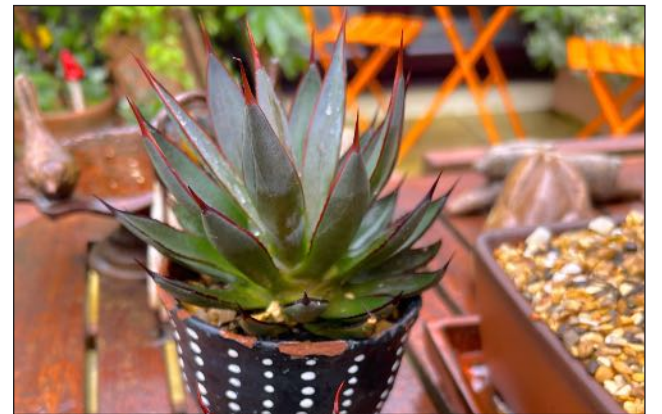
with Geoff Stonebanks



Succulents on display by summer house



Echeveria Agavoides Lipstick Red



Mangave praying hands

The succulents are looking good including a fierce-looking specimen

CHECK out one of the wonderful portrait images, taken by professional photographer, Jon Santa Cruz, in the garden last month. I love his photo of me looking at the blossom on the Cox's Orange Pippin tree, with the vaulting, vintage rocking horse below. So different and original.

It's not long now until I receive a group of visitors from Winchelsea, slightly before our official opening on the 1st June. Thankfully, they are not having refreshments here, but at the garden they are visiting first. I'd find it very difficult at present, as I'm still on crutches! I can't say the garden is looking its very best, but it does pass muster, just!

I have not been able to potter around in it and tidy everything up, since I came out of hospital at the beginning of the month! That said, I'm sure the visitors will not notice!

The succulents positioned around the summer house are looking good now. After getting them out slightly early this year they sustained a few days of cold overnight temperatures but the recent heat seems to have brought them all back to life again. They are always an eye catcher with visitors.

A few years ago, some friends gave me a ponytail palm which is an eye-catching and low-maintenance house plant. They had had it for many years but it was too big for them to keep. I decided I'd give it a home in the garden through the summer and place it in the heated greenhouse through the winter. Despite its name, it's not a true palm but belongs to the Asparagaceae family and is native to Mexico, it's also known as the elephant's foot tree or bottle palm due to its swollen trunk base. Its unique appearance, resilience and ease of care make it an excellent choice for beginner and experienced gardeners. It is easily recognisable by long, slender and arching leaves that resemble a ponytail, hence its name. It can reach a height of 4.5m in the wild, but more realistically 2.5m when grown indoors. As a slow-growing perennial plant, the ponytail palm can live for several

decades when properly cared for, with some specimens known to last for over 100 years. At that rate it's sure to outlive me!

There are a few gardens opening for the National Garden Scheme across the county this weekend which you could go along and visit! Here are three of those opening. Try 96 Ashford Road in Hastings, open today, Saturday, from 1pm to 4.30pm for a very Japanese influenced plot. Tomorrow, Sunday you could pop along to Penns in the Rocks in Groombridge open from 2pm to 6pm and see some amazing rocks over 140 million years old along with many azaleas, magnolias and tulips. The third is Mountfield Court in Robertsbridge open from 2pm to 5pm tomorrow. You can wander through the 3-acre woodland garden with some outstanding views. Full details on all the gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk

A couple of pretty succulents in my garden are Echeveria agavoides, also known as 'Lipstick' and Mangave 'Praying Hands'.

The former is a lovely slim leaved beauty that 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 would look great in a succulent bowl or bed to add texture. It would also make a great feature plant as mine is in a single terracotta pot set within my succulent display.

The latter is an extraordinary departure from the usual star-shaped rosettes of mangave. Each dark green, scale-like leaf curls upwards into the elegant form of an artichoke. The tip of each leaf is finished with a maroon spine, the spines converging at the top where the artichoke comes to a point. Boasting the architectural qualities of an Agave, but much faster growing, Mangave makes a striking succulent specimen for a conservatory or patio pot. This indoor/outdoor plant represents a revolution in plant breeding. Mangave is a hybrid cross between an Agave and Manfreda, hardier



Geoff, horse and Cox's Orange Pippin Tree
Image: jon santa cruz

than an Agave, faster-growing, lacking those vicious spikes and with a fuller, tighter rosette like an Echeveria. They are drought tolerant, but require a little watering and can be grown outside all year in areas with very mild winters such as coastal and city gardens, but like most tender perennials, will otherwise need to be brought into a frost-free greenhouse or conservatory over winter. Use it as a striking focal specimen on its own or combine it with other succulents and tropical bedding for a really wow-factor display. I tend to house mine in the greenhouse through the winter months.

Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or arrange a visit this summer by emailing visitdriftwood@gmail.com



Pony tail palm