

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Cordyline australis



Siberian dogwood



Striatula

Elephant's ears really earn their keep in the garden all year

THIS weekend it's all about planting up some new acquisitions in the garden at Driftwood.

Following the sad demise of some of the large agave, which I wrote about last month, I had to put something new in their place. On a recent weekend away, I purchased five new plants to fill the gaps. In the back garden, I already have two large specimens of Aloe Striatula, also called the striped-stemmed aloe.

It is an evergreen succulent with bushy, scrambling stems. The stems and leaf sheaths are striped light and dark green. In the summer, yellow racemes of flowers with protruding orange stamens are produced on spikes 40cm high.

As an endemic of high-altitude habitats in South Africa, providing it is given very sharp drainage, mine are on chalk, the plant is hardy in average winters, throughout much of the UK, except up in the far north.

That said, both mine have come through the recent really cold weather, with no protection at all, so far unscathed. I decided that I'd place them both in the beach garden, they will fit perfectly in some of the gaps created by the agave removal and once they get fully grown will look amazing.

Growing well, close by in the beach garden, is a very large clump of bergenia.

They have been there now for over ten years and never fail to produce lovely flowers pink at this time of the year.

Also called elephant's ears, these easy-to-grow, evergreen perennials really earn their keep, making a year-round contribution to borders.

Their large leathery leaves, often tinged red in winter, make attractive ground cover, while the flowers are an early bounty for pollinating insects. They combine well with other spring flowers in shade or sun and thrive well in humus-rich, moist but well drained soil.

They will also tolerate poor soil, and this can enhance the leaves' reddish tints in autumn and winter. They look equally at home in a gravel garden too.

While away in Suffolk recently, we visited a garden that had a lot of

dogwoods on show. Not a plant I have ever owned before, I decided I had to have one too. I have opted for a bright red one called Cornus alba "Sibirica", or Siberian dogwood. They are mostly grown for their wonderful coloured stems and can provide a fabulous bright flash of colour in autumn and winter.

They look good with other species in a mixed hedge or standing on their own.

Dogwoods are very hardy and do well in sunny sites or partial shade and especially in moist areas. They are also very good in front of an evergreen hedge where normally nutrients, water and sunlight would be in short supply.

Robins and mistle thrushes love the berries in late summer/early autumn too. Mine has been planted in the back garden, adjacent to the new patio by the shed where it is clearly visible from the house, especially through the winter months.

Another addition to the beach garden is a small Cordyline australis, also known as the New Zealand Cabbage Palm. This is an erect, palm-like tree with arching narrow green leaves and belongs to the Dracaena family.

A mature Cordyline Australis tree bears plumes of tiny, creamy white flowers, followed by white or blue-tinted berries. It reaches a maximum height of five metres, with a maximum spread of 1.5 metres.

They flower from June to July and fruit in August. They prefer full sun or partial shade and will tolerate any soil except soil that is waterlogged. The palm is hardy and fast growing and, more importantly, is drought tolerant and also wind and salt tolerant. A perfect addition therefore to a coastal garden.

Driftwood already has two tall trees in the back garden, both of which have done really well in recent years.

The final new addition is a yucca, called filamentosa, commonly called Adam's needle. The plant is fully hardy and will produce towering spikes of white, bell-shaped flowers through July and August, above clumps of stiff, dark green, lance-shaped leaves.

Adam's needle makes an excellent



Geoff and bergenia flowering in the beach garden

focal point for a sunny, well-drained Mediterranean-style garden. A gravel mulch accentuates the architectural foliage and helps to protect the crown of the plant from frost damage.

The leaves have sharp tips and serrated edges, so it's best not planted where you are going to brush past it.

Mine has been planted close to the new fibreglass boat in the beach garden, ensuring visitors are not going to get too close.

I'll still be placing some of my smaller agave in among the planting but retaining them in pots, so they can be safely removed to a dry area through the winter months.

The problem will come once they get too heavy to carry.

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



Yucca filamentosa