

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Helichrysum, the liquorice plant, amongst fatsia camouflage



Brown Hakonechloa leaves - I think they're still pretty



The pretty little vinca at the top of the garden

## There's plenty to brighten up a garden in the depths of winter

UNTIL recently, the weather has been relatively mild and I have been amazed at some of the flowers still blooming in my garden at this time of the year. My Tess of the d'Urbervilles (sadly retired now by David Austin Roses) has started to bloom again in the last couple of weeks. It looked great frosted too. Forever part of our history, these roses have paved the way for many more roses to come. In the late 1940s, David Austin set out on his quest to breed the most beautiful and healthy roses; a vision that continues today, more than 80 years later. This vision drives the continuing assessment of rose varieties in the current collection to ensure they reach exacting standards and expectations. Due to climate changes and the evolution of plant diseases, some historical varieties, like Tess, are no longer available. Mine is a great climbing rose, dazzling every year.

As we begin a new year, so begins the National Garden Scheme's programme of 2025 open gardens. Whilst it tends to be a slow burner through January and February, there are several beautiful snowdrop and hellebore gardens to look forward to. We do have a small garden in Sussex that will open later this month. It's 5 Whitemans Close in Cuckfield, opening on Saturday 25th, Monday 27th, Wednesday 29th and Friday 31st January (plus dates in February) between 11am and 3.30 pm with entry £8.50. Pre-booking is essential, so you may want to book your slot now, by calling 01444 473520 or by emailing shirley.carmanmartin@ngs.org.uk for information and booking. This garden shows that winter need not be dull, as there is much to see and enjoy in the depths of the season. The owner has collected many single and double snowdrops, hellebores, bulbs and other winter treasures, some not widely known. As it is a sheltered garden, there will be flowers to enjoy too. Check out the enormous Daphne "Bholua" that scents the garden for weeks on end.

A garden favourite of mine is the pretty Helichrysum Petiolare Silver, also known as the 'liquorice

plant' due to its slight liquorice scent. It is a fantastic trailing plant which produces masses of soft and felted silvery-green leaves. This evergreen variety is low-maintenance, reliable and drought tolerant, making it ideal for any garden. It is the perfect addition to hanging baskets and containers where the attractive foliage will trail 60cm. I buy it and plant in containers and its trailing habit seems to knit everything together as the stems continually grow. The plant prefers full sun, or partial shade with free-draining soil or compost and will act as the perfect foil for any container plant. Mine pictured is growing amongst a fatsia camouflage.

The leaves on my Hakonechloa have all turned brown now but I still love the look of the plant so leave them there until the spring and remove before any new growth appears. This is a fab Japanese grass, for a shadier spot, or one with reasonable moisture. Hakone grass (named after a mountainous area south west of the Tokyo megalopolis) is deciduous, with stems and small sprays of fine flowers. The various forms of foliage, green to yellow and variegated, are a highlight. When settled and making a low rounded mound, a little wind rippling through them is quite a sight.

In the greenhouse, my delicate Brazilian fuchsia has begun to flower. This is an exquisite and unusual winter flowering shrub which will really brighten up the darker months with its tropical, two-tone, tubular flowers. The dangling blooms are borne in profusion from winter to early spring, against a background of dark, evergreen foliage. Justicia rizzinii, to give it its proper name, is an exotic evergreen shrub, requiring a frost-free position all year round. It makes a neat and compact container plant as you can see with the one I am holding. It is a perfect addition for a warm conservatory or heated greenhouse. In very mild, frost-free locations it may be grown outdoors in a sheltered sunny border. I've had mine for several years now and it never fails to dazzle through the early months of the year. This season it is in the



A Brazilian fuchsia from my greenhouse

greenhouse but in previous years I have housed it in the back porch of the house too.

Also flowering well this week is the pretty little vinca at the top of the garden. These are also known as periwinkle, renowned for their trailing and ground cover qualities which can be used in borders or shady areas. They can be evergreen subshrubs or herbaceous perennials, and have paired leaves and salver-shaped flowers. The hardy vinca species provide a welcome splash of colour in shady areas, some from mid-winter onwards; these are welcome not only to us but also to those bumblebees and solitary bees that emerge early in the season.

■ Read more of Geoff's garden at [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk)



Sadly Tess of the D'Urbervilles is no longer available