

The Driftwood Garden Diary

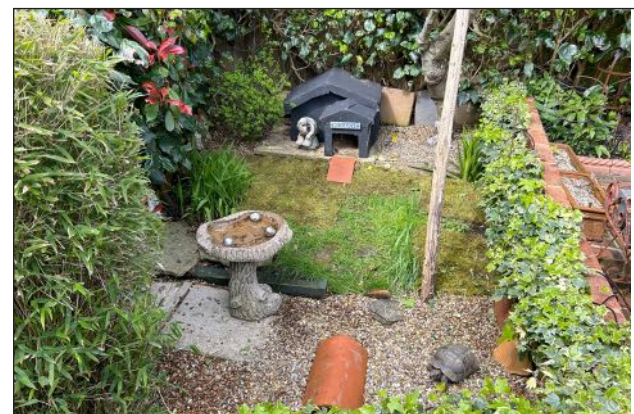
with Geoff Stonebanks



Solomon's seal



Astrantia and aubretia



Hector's pen makeover

Hector the tortoise has had a summer makeover on his pen

THIS weekend there are five gardens across the county that you could visit with the National Garden Scheme.

Today, May 11, over in Hastings 96 Ashford Road will open its gate from 1.30pm to 4.30pm with entry £3 and Cookcroft in Bookers Lane, Earnley near Chichester, follows suit between 11am and 4pm with entry £5.

Meanwhile, tomorrow, there are three gardens to visit, Hammerwood House in Iping, near Midhurst between 1pm and 5pm, Penns in the Rocks in Groombridge between 2pm and 6pm and finally, Mountfield Court in Robertsbridge between 2pm and 5pm.

Full details on all five gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk and don't forget to catch up with my regular weekly slot on BBC Radio Sussex tomorrow with Pat Marsh on Sunday Gardening at about 11.40am. I'll be talking about gardens that open for the scheme next week.

With just three weeks to go until my first booked visitors arrive at Driftwood, there is still much to do. The garden is really starting to come alive, like the three amazing slower stems emerging from the palms in the gravel beds at the rear. There are several more on other palms around the plot. I've had to take the chain saw to the outer fronds as they have become so badly damaged with the strong winds we have had throughout the winter.

It's good to remember that we can still experience mornings with some frost. It can affect many plants and is particularly damaging to tender new growth and blossom at this time of year.

The risks of frost damage can be reduced by taking some simple steps to protect the plants in your garden.

Here are a couple that might help. You can move container grown plants to a sheltered part of the garden in cold weather and provide some extra protection by wrapping the pot in bubble wrap or cover plants with a double layer of horticultural fleece or other suitable protection when frost is forecast.

Despite the possibility of frost,

I've been busy planting this week to ensure I'm ready for early visitors. Some are planted in a variety of different containers which I am able to move around the garden as plants go over and the overall look of the garden can be maintained.

Our tortoise Hector is now fully awake and enjoying his time in the garden, especially when the sun shines.

His pen, right at the top of the garden, has had a spring makeover, with some new turf laid to tidy the area up.

A great seaside plant, often found growing in all coastal areas is sea kale.

I have several large clumps of it growing in gravel beds in both the front and rear gardens. Sea kale or *crambe maritima*, is a striking plant that is both ornamental and edible.

The large leaves are a lovely glaucous green, with wavy edges, and in summer these are crowned with a cloud of tiny white perfumed flowers. These nectar-rich flowers are great for attracting pollinating insects.

As the name suggests, sea kale is often found growing wild on the coast.

In gardens, it looks good planted in dry sunny beds or into gravel, with other plants that favour this habitat, such as *kniphofia* and *thrift*.

Or you could include it in your vegetable plot and harvest the young shoots in spring to eat raw or steamed – they taste like asparagus.

Growing in several spots across the garden is *mugwort*, mine is a variegated *artemisia vulgaris* with white and green variegated leaves.

It is tall and very easy to grow but spreads quickly and develops into a well-established clump which looks very attractive with its two tone leaves.

I tend to keep mine under control and make sure it does not get too tall and take over. It is growing behind some *aubretia* below a rusty metal arch frame. Apparently, in the past it has been regarded as a magical herb, *mugwort* was one of nine herbs used to repel spirits and demons.

A pretty plant in the beach garden is *Solomon's Seal* or *ladder of heaven*. It is a perennial with



Geoff and the palm flowers and, right, sea kale

graceful, arching stems with pleated oval leaves that are paired along their length.

These are joined by lightly scented, green-tipped, white bell-like flowers in May and June, followed by black berries.

The plant has been grown in British gardens for centuries.

Its common name of *Solomon's seal* has many suggested origins – one theory is that it is inspired by the mark where the stem emerges from the rhizome, which looks like two interlocked triangles, the symbol of the biblical figure *Solomon*.

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

