

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Artemisia is a great groundcover plant



Bold and bright, the double daffodil narcissus 'replete'



Gunnera emerging after a winter under fleece

Spring is making its presence felt with stunning flowers and foliage

A GREAT groundcover plant, which can be a bit of a thug unless you manage it well, is artemisia. Also known as mugwort or sagebrush, artemisia are common UK garden plants and are entirely hardy. They are grown for their impressive foliage effect. The flower heads of artemisia are generally of little real interest but the plants do have many uses in the rockery or herbaceous border. Apart from the dwarf growing varieties both perennial and, also, evergreen species are best cut back hard to the base of the plant in the spring to maintain their compact habit and to generally tidy them up and prevent them getting "leggy". I have quite a few patches of it growing throughout the back garden and it blends in well with many other plants and creates the perfect backdrop to display the pretty ceramic flower heads pictured.

This weekend two of the gardens opening for the National Garden Scheme in the county are The Garden House at 5 Warleigh Road in Brighton and Penns in the Rocks in Groombridge. The former opens its garden gate tomorrow, Sunday 13th from 1pm to 5pm with entrance £6. This is one of Brighton's secret gardens aiming to provide year-round interest with trees, shrubs, herbaceous borders and annuals, fruit and vegetables. It's a friendly garden, with a touch of magic to delight visitors, above all it is a slice of the country in the midst of a bustling city with plants for sale too.

The latter also opens tomorrow from 2pm to 6pm with entry £7.50 but they only take cash at this opening. This is a large garden with a spectacular outcrop of rocks, 140 million years old. See the lake, 18th century temple and woods. Daffodils, bluebells, azaleas, magnolia and tulips will ablaze. Full details on both gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk

As winter ends and spring starts making its colourful presence felt, it throws the occasional curve-ball, a convention breaking delivery that blows tradition out of the window. You expect daffodils to

appear in early spring and you probably expect them to be bright yellow flowers with yellow outer petals and central cup. Then you discover narcissus "replete", an over-the-top statement on the arrival of spring. Narcissus "replete" is a double daffodil which irreverently swirls pinkish coral and apricot around like a ripple in a vanilla ice-cream-coloured bloom. It's bold, bright and sure to draw the attention and admiration of all who see it. I have several of these very pretty narcissus dazzling in my garden at the moment along with many other spring flowers.

A rather unusual plant to have in a relatively small garden is a gunnera! I have two, both planted in large containers, one buried in the ground and one sitting in amongst a bed of ferns. They have been covered with fleece through the winter months and have recently been uncovered. You can see the dramatic, architectural leaves starting to form. Both plants create a dramatic statement, sitting behind the corten steel water feature in the garden.

A shrub that looks pretty at this time of year is the photinia; it is a genus of Asian and North American shrubs, which includes a group of evergreen hybrids grown specifically for their colourful young foliage. You can see the shrub at the top of my garden with glossy dark green adult foliage and variable red tinted young leaves unfolding. This bright red, glossy new foliage makes photinia "red robin" a popular choice for hedging. The mature foliage is dark green with red tinges and creamy white spring flowers.

I've spent the last few weeks getting the garden ready to open for visitors in June and it is always a joy to empty the shed and summer house of all the objets d'art, carefully stored in them through the winter months. You can see me pictured with one of my favourites, a vintage child's rocking horse. I purchased the piece several years ago from an antique shop and got a local craftsman to make me a metal frame, so it could be positioned,



The vintage rocking horse vaulting the hedge

vaulting the hedge, as you can see. It is always a favourite for visitors to comment on when looking around the garden.

This year, I have had to start doing things much earlier. I am going to lose all of May in being able to work the garden as I have a scheduled knee replacement for the 30th April, which will mean I am likely to be out of action outdoors for up to six weeks thereafter. I'm hoping it will be a swift return to being able to get outside but the ability to actually garden will be severely restricted. The plan is to get everything ready before the 30th and then rely on help and support as the garden opens from June 1.

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



Photinia 'red robin' is a popular choice for hedging