

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



The ferns have been cut back



Seedling pine bonsai



Winter jasmine

## Lovely splash of colour from 'the flower that welcomes spring'

**A** LOVELY gift from my mother for Christmas in 2022 was a boxed kit to grow five different bonsai trees. Sadly, only the seeds from the pine were successful and three of them now look really well and are growing in small containers as pictured. I'm quite pleased because I'm not really a gardener who tends to grow anything from seed, certainly not with any great success.

This summer I am going to do my very best to turn them into mini bonsai pines, by carefully wiring and trimming. Wish me luck.

I've just spent some time this week tidying up the ferns that were growing behind the corten steel wall. The recent strong winds had badly flattened them and they had become very brown.

It's quite nice to see the wall again from the house but it won't be long before the new fronds start to appear again and tower over the top of the metal.

Providing a splash of colour in the garden at the back is the long-established winter jasmine.

It was already in the garden when we moved here almost 20 years ago. Winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*), is a popular and reliable shrub, valued for its cheery, bright yellow flowers, which appear on bare stems.

The hardiest of the jasmines, unlike others, its blooms are unscented, but they make up for this by appearing very early in the season, sometimes as you can see, as early as January.

In its native China, winter jasmine is often called yingchun which means "flower that welcomes spring".

It is very easy to grow and care for and is usually grown as a climber, trained against sunny walls using galvanised wires. It is best to prune regularly to prevent bald patches appearing. Alternatively, it could be grown over a low hanging wall or in a large pot, where its stems can trail over the sides, to beautiful effect.

It doesn't naturally twine like other jasmines, so if you're growing it up a wall or trellis, you'll need to tie in shoots to the trellis or wires.

In the beach garden at the front of

the house, I have a large patch of bergenia. These, easy-to-grow, evergreen perennials really earn their keep, making a year-round contribution to borders.

Their large leathery leaves 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. In late winter and spring, loose clusters of usually pink bell-like flowers open on upright stems. Happy in sun or shade, bergenias thrive in humus-rich, moist but well drained soil.

They will also tolerate poor soil, like the chalk in my beach garden and this can enhance the leaves' reddish tints in autumn and winter. In an exposed site like mine, cold winds can damage the foliage and frost can spoil early flowers but mine seem to have done well.

Just before flowering in late winter or early spring, cut off any leaves that have been damaged or blackened by winter weather, to show off the blooms to best effect.

Just in case any readers have been checking for snowdrop gardens opening in Sussex later this month to visit, I have to report that 5 Whitmans Close in Cuckfield, near Haywards Heath, that was scheduled to open for the National Garden Scheme, has now had to cancel all its open dates for 2024 for medical reasons. They were scheduled to begin on January 25, opening various dates through until February 15.

Other snowdrop gardens, such as Pembury House in Clayton, will begin its season of various dates on Friday, February 9, but more on that next month.

I'm very pleased to say that my collection of succulents in the heated greenhouse are all doing really well as you can see. Surprisingly, this winter, the heater has not had to kick in very often and the outdoor temperatures have been so mild in recent weeks, long may it continue.

That said, winter can be a difficult time for wildlife.

When the temperatures finally plummet and food becomes difficult to find, insect-eating birds turn to alternative foods, some species travel far and wide, and foraging behaviour adapts, but we



Geoff and the bergenia

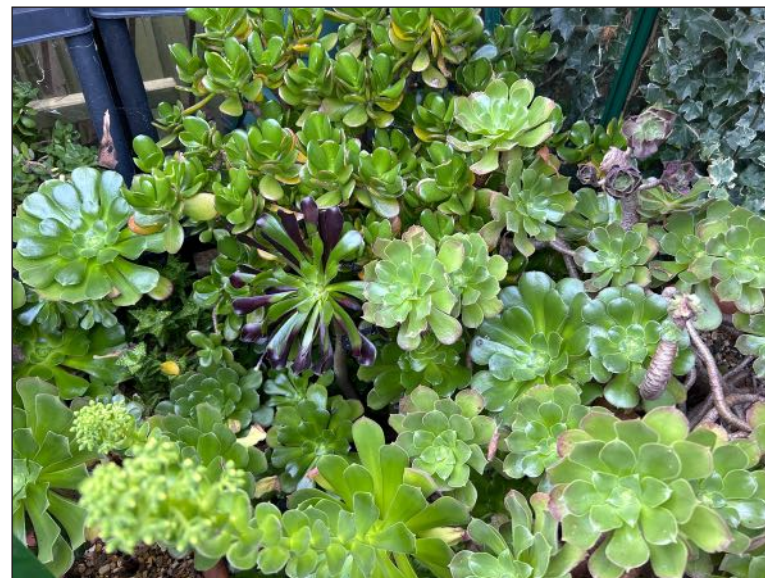
can lend a helping hand by providing a welcome source of extra food for birds to turn to in leaner times.

The RSPB says, when buying bird food, try to get a good mix of peanuts, seeds and live food like mealworms and waxworms. Fruit, especially bruised apples and pears, will be popular with thrushes and blackbirds. Household scraps like pastry, cooked rice and breadcrumbs should only be offered in small amounts occasionally.

Brush off debris every time you put out fresh food and scrub the table with a mild disinfectant solution weekly.

Move the table from time to time to stop droppings building up underneath.

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



Aeoniums doing well in the greenhouse