

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



An unknown azalea



Armeria



Rhododendron Cunningham's White

## Perfect plant for coastal gardens

**W**E HAVE been very lucky to have had ten days away at the end of last month, to mark my 70th birthday. We spent the time in the Cotswolds in a lovely cottage, adjacent to a farm. Throughout the week we visited many gardens in the area.

You can see me pictured with Chester standing in the grounds of a magnificent English Heritage estate, Witley Court and gardens, which was a perfect place to spend time. We also saw Painswick Roccoco Garden, Cerney House, the gardens at the American Museum in Bath, Picton garden, Part-y-Seal in Monmouth and a magnificent 12 garden trail with the National Garden Scheme near Lechlade. Fortunately, the weather was reasonable with only one wet day, my birthday.

Now it's back to work getting Driftwood ready for visitors. In my beach garden I have several clumps of thrift or *Armeria maritima*. Sea thrift is typically found growing on cliffs and seashores but also makes a pretty garden flower. A compact evergreen perennial, it forms low clumps from which long stems of soft pink blooms emerge in summer. Mine are already flowering.

It's very easy to grow and makes a good rockery plant too. Mine is set in the gravel of the beach garden at the front of the house and has been there 11 years.

It will grow well in poor, well-drained soil in full sun. Mine are on chalk. If you deadhead the spent blooms, it will help prolong flowering.

Thrift is known for attracting bees, butterflies, moths and other pollinators as it has nectar/pollen-rich flowers. Its blooms also make a pretty cut flower. It is a perennial and will return each year, needing little maintenance. The plant is also virtually pest disease-free, making it the perfect plant to use for edging, coastal gardens, or borders.

You can divide the plant in early spring if it becomes woody and unproductive, or if the plant rots in the centre. Dig the plant, digging deeply to prevent damage to the roots and lift from the soil and pull the clump into smaller sections.

Discard the woody or rotten parts and replant the healthy sections.

There are more and more gardens starting to open each week now for the National Garden Scheme across the county. This weekend you could visit Hastings and see 96 Ashford Road open today, along with Cookcroft in Earnley and Peilers Retreat at 70 Ford Road in Arundel. Opening both days over the weekend are Limekiln Farm in Chalvington and The Warren group of gardens in Crowborough. Opening on Sunday only, there is Champs Hill in Coldwaltham, Hammerwood House near Midhurst, 28 Larkspur Way in Southwater and finally, Penns in the Rocks in Groombridge. Full details on opening times and prices for all the gardens can be found at [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk).

Commonly classed as either rhododendrons or azaleas, these popular woodland shrubs put on spectacular flowering displays from spring to early summer. Rhododendrons are usually medium or large evergreen shrubs, while azaleas tend to be smaller and may be evergreen or deciduous.

Azalea flowers are usually smaller, but come in a more vivid array of shades, and are sometimes gloriously fragrant. Most rhododendrons and azaleas require acid soils. I have a few planted in my garden.

One shrub I have owned for many years now, I brought it with me from my garden in London, is Cunningham's White.

It is a robust evergreen shrub growing to 2.2m tall, with dark green foliage and loose trusses of funnel-shaped white flowers. Grow in moist but well-drained, leafy, humus-rich acid soil in part shade with shelter.

Mine is in a container at the back of the house. Mauve buds open to white flowers with a pale-yellow eye in early May. With delicate small flowers, it is a very tough dense plant which is good for screening and difficult positions. Cunningham's White is also tolerant of neutral/slightly alkaline soil. It certainly ranks as one of my favourites and is ideal for hedging and screening.

Another gorgeous rhododendron



Geoff and Chester at Witley Park

in my garden is Nancy Evans, a compact evergreen shrub with bronze young foliage, becoming glossy green, and rounded trusses of orange-flushed amber-yellow flowers opening from orange-red buds in late spring.

I bought this one just a year ago now and it has begun to flower now. The foliage is of particular interest, having distinct oval leaves.

The new foliage has bronzy leaves which turn a lovely glossy deep green. As with all yellow Rhododendrons, this plant does need good drainage, but not dry conditions.

Also pictured here is a small red azalea growing over the railway sleepers in the back garden, the name of which I am unsure of.

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



Rhododendron Nancy Evans