GEOFF STONEBANKS
The Driftwood Garden Diary



Ivy blossoms feed insects as days cool

IT'S very hard to believe that Christmas is just under six weeks away. The year has really flown by.

One of the things I shall be bringing indoors to help decorate the house next month are sprigs of ivy. This year, there has been a plentiful supply of flower heads on the hedges in my garden. Ivy naturally blooms in late summer and autumn, typically September to November. Warm or dry spells earlier in the season can sometimes bunch up or shift the timing, making the globe-shaped flower clusters look especially dense, so maybe the constant heatwaves this summer have helped produce so many flowers. Apparently, common ivy tops the charts as the most-visited late-season flower for bees, hoverflies and butterflies and after flowering, those heads turn into high-fat black berries that feed thrushes, blackbirds, and other winter birds. Some years I spray the foliage silver and gold and mix with the natural pieces to make great mantle or table decorations.

Another plant producing many flower heads at the moment is the fatsia. I mentioned them last week in my diary. I have three types growing in my garden. The flowers pictured are on the plain leaf fatsia growing in a large container on the north-facing wall at the back of the house. It too produces black berries that the birds love.

In the raised bed outside the French windows from the kitchen, I have half a dozen large clumps of deciduous ferns. I always cut them right back in the autumn to make way for new growth in the spring. While the experts say they are best left until late winter or early spring, I have always cut mine back now to tidy up the garden. I used to find that if I left it too late, I risked damaging the new spring growth as the fronds unfurled. Over twenty or more years they do not seem to have suffered. Evergreen ferns do not need a full heavy cutback; instead, simply snip off individual dead, brown, or ragged fronds at the base in early spring before the new growth takes over. Once they have been cut back it really opens up the view of the garden from the kitchen over the winter months as you can see.



Stunning colours of Sheffield Park. Image: Geoff Stonebanks

Just last week, we spent the morning at the National Trust's Sheffield Park. We were extremely fortunate in having a lovely sunny, but extremely chilly, morning. It was perfect weather for walking our little terrier Chester there too. I think the vivid autumn colours were more stunning this year than I can remember from previous visits. Autumn is the season the garden was planted for. Arthur Soames, owner during the early 20th century, introduced many of the species which create this spectacle including Nyssa, Acer and Taxodiums. The reflections in the lakes add to the splendour and provide the perfect photograph. The autumn planting is recognised as being of international importance, so much so that the garden has received a Grade I listing. Autumn colour can start as early as mid-September and last until mid-November. There are a huge variety of native and non-native tree species which all reach their peak at different times, so there is always something to see throughout the season. It may be worth still going along to catch the last of the display!

At the end of last month, I had some work completed at the top of the garden. The decking behind the studio had begun to rot and I feared putting my foot straight through it in the summer. I have had all the decking removed and a new concrete base put down to marry up with the existing base of the studio and the concrete bases of the rear garden fence panels. It is much more practical now and is an area I use plastic shelving to store excess pots and planters from the garden. While the guys were here, they also repaired some of the damaged woodwork at the rear of the studio and gave it a good sand down and a new coat of varnish to boot. It looks as good as new again.

Another improvement by the greenhouse and the studio has been to widen the access from a very narrow space, impossible to get a sack barrow through, to one that will now make life a lot easier for me by being able to get the trolley right to the top of the garden. It has become much harder, as I've got older, to navigate that part of the plot.

Fingers crossed it should be a little easier now. The area directly behind the greenhouse that had been very uneven has also had a concrete path put down as well.

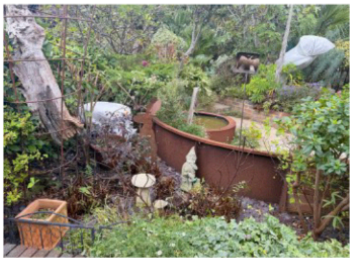
Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or follow both him and the garden on social media.



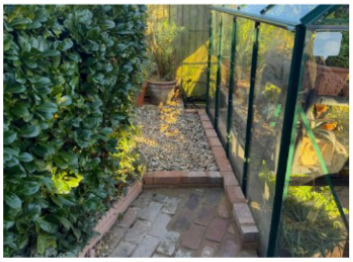
Plenty of ivy flower heads



Fatsia flower heads



Fern cut back



The widened path