

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Echimium



Erigeron



Fascicularia bicolor

## One of my all-time favourites

I think one of my all-time favourite plants in the garden is the beautiful *Erigeron karvinskianus*, or Mexican fleabane.

It provides much needed nectar and pollen for bees and the many other types of pollinating insects. It's a perennial, forming wide mats, up to 15cm in height, with narrow, hairy leaves and daisy-type flower-heads, 15mm in width, opening white but soon turning pinkish-purple as you can see in the picture. It grows well in a wide range of conditions, from poor to fertile soils. More importantly, in the current climate, it is drought tolerant, although it will produce a larger mound of foliage and flowers if it doesn't dry out for long periods in summer. The plant thrives in full sun, but will tolerate some shade. I have large clumps throughout my garden, both in the gravel of the beach garden and among the planting at the rear.

This weekend, I plan to gather in my harvest of pears from the lone pear tree. It seems to have produced one of the best crops in recent years! The tree was part of the original garden when we moved in, back in 2004. There are always too many to eat, so I generally poach the fruit and store in the freezer to enjoy in pies and crumbles through the winter months. Coupled with the fruit picking, there is still much cutting back to do as the mix of rain and sunshine in recent weeks has meant many shrubs have thrown up lots of new growth. In a small garden like mine, it is important to keep everything in check so it does not get too overgrown.

There are just three more garden openings for the National Garden Scheme in Sussex before the 2023 season comes to an end. The first of which is Peelers Retreat at 70 Ford Road in Arundel that will open its garden gate today, 14th, between 2pm and 5pm. Entry is £5, with children free. They will be serving home-made teas to enjoy. This inspirational space is a delight, with plenty of areas to sit and relax. The many

interlocking beds are packed with year-round colour and scent, shaded by some specimen trees, don't miss the inventive water feature and rill, raised fish pond and a look out for the working Victorian fireplace.

After losing all my first year echium plants last winter, which should have flowered this summer, I was extremely pleased to discover so many seedlings, growing up through the gravel, in the beach garden. There must be over 80 of them in varying sizes. You can see some of them pictured. *Echium pininana* is a stunning biennial plant from the Canary Islands. In its first year it forms a low rosette of silver, hairy, spear-like leaves, and then in the second year it sends up a huge spike loaded with small blue flowers. It makes a dramatic statement in a sunny, sheltered garden, and is extremely attractive to bees.

After flowering, they scatter their seed and die. It should self-seed readily in mild, sheltered parts of the UK, but seed is unlikely to germinate in cooler regions. *Echium* is well-known for attracting bees, butterflies/moths and other pollinators as it has nectar/pollen rich flowers. I doubt mine will survive the winter so I am going to carefully transplant them to containers and store them under cover for the winter. Next spring I'll put them back in the beach garden and hope they do well.

Visitors to my garden will be well aware of my love for rusty metal sculpture. You can see me holding two more interesting pieces. They are leaf forms on stakes which are going to look great amongst the planting. In addition to these larger ones, I bought some smaller ones and some rusty miniature mushrooms too.

A plant that always looks great at this time of the year is the stunning *Fascicularia bicolor*, or crimson bromeliad. It is a rosette-forming, terrestrial bromeliad with slender, spiny-toothed, rigid, mid to dark-green, evergreen leaves up to 50cm long. In summer each mature rosette produces a dense



Geoff and the new sculpture

central cluster of pale sky-blue flowers surrounded by ivory-white bracts. At this time, the innermost leaves of the rosette turn scarlet red. Mine are growing outdoors, in the gravel of the beach garden, which is on chalk. The plants don't like winter wet and prefer a frost-free location. That said, mine have been planted in the beach garden now for three years and managed to get through the harsh winter last year unprotected.

It originates from Chile and is a rare and unusual plant to have in your garden. In summer, the inner leaves turn bright red and a ball of electric blue and yellow flowers are formed at the centre of mature plants.

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



Pera crop