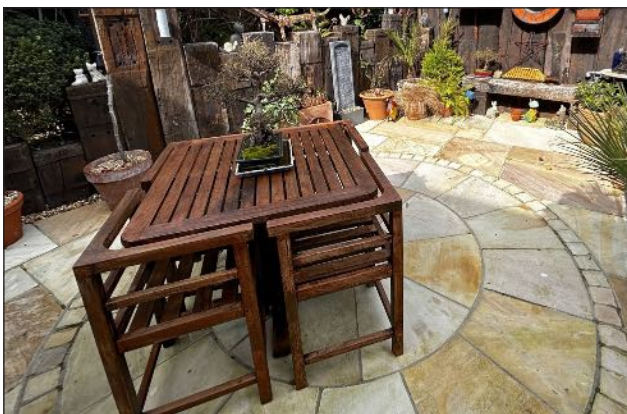


The Driftwood Garden Diary

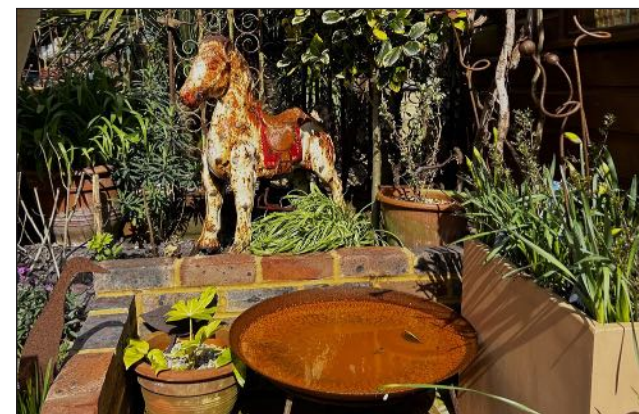
with Geoff Stonebanks



Damaged oleander



Renewed outdoor table and chairs



Vintage horse and corden birdbath

Even fleeces were not enough to save oleanders from the cold

THIS time of the year starts to see the final blooms on magnificent camellias around the garden. Mine have been very successful this spring, with masses of flowers across all five potted shrubs.

I have a gathering of four pots, set against the north facing back wall.

The stunning flowers of the camellia William Bartlett are probably my favourite. It is a large evergreen shrub with glossy, ovate dark green leaves with finely serrated edges. Flowers are formal, double up to 11cm across, with pale pink, finely streaked and spotted with dark pink. It produces so many pretty flowers each spring and never fails to impress, mine was a gift from a friend.

Another shrub is over 30 years old and I acquired it when I was living in London and before I really got involved with gardening so regret I do not know its name. It is very pretty nonetheless.

This weekend, the National Garden Scheme has three gardens you could choose to visit across the county. The first is Penns in the Rocks in Groombridge, near Tunbridge Wells. Open on Sunday from 2pm to 6pm, it has a large garden with a spectacular outcrop of rocks, 140 million years old.

Also open on Sunday, is Newtimber Place in Newtimber with gardens and woods full of bulbs and wild flowers, herbaceous borders and lawns. It opens from 2pm to 5.30pm.

The third garden is Peellers Retreat at 70 Ford Road in Arundel between 2pm and 5pm, today, Saturday.

This inspirational space is a delight, with plenty of areas to sit and relax, enjoying delicious teas. Interlocking beds packed with year-round colour and scent, shaded by specimen trees, an inventive water feature and rill, raised fish pond and a working Victorian fireplace. You can check out all the details and prices on the scheme's website, www.ngs.org.uk

I was bitterly disappointed

recently to take the fleece covers off my six oleander shrubs. Also known as a Nerium oleander, it is a tender shrub and needs to be grown where temperatures never dip below freezing, so in the UK it's only suitable for growing outside in the mildest areas, unless carefully protected.

I've had mine several years now and have always carefully fleeced them, without any problem until this winter, when it was much colder than usual. Two of them were completely unharmed, with four being quite badly damaged, having now cut them back, I hope they will recover with some new growth this spring.

They tolerate a wide range of conditions, including difficult soil, salt spray, high pH, severe pruning, reflected heat from pavements and walls, and drought. The one thing they can't withstand, though, is winter temperatures below minus 7C.

In readiness for my garden openings this summer, I have given the teak furniture a very thorough clean. The table and four chairs were a rather expensive and impulsive purchase from the Chelsea Flower Show, back in 2002. After 20 years it had started to look a bit shabby. I decided to attack it with the high-pressure cleaner and let it dry before applying several coats of a teak finish, which has really given it a new lease of life.

The colouring now is much lighter than the very dark weathered appearance of recent years, much more appealing and looks great with one of my Chinese elm bonsai trees atop.

Next weekend, between April 21 and 23, Firls Place hosts a garden show. This is an annual, springtime event, set in the beautiful surroundings of the Firls Estate, in the heart of the South Downs National Park. Across the three days, it features specialist growers, garden related goods, artisan designs, homeware products, fashion accessories and delicious country foods. There are daily talks, activities for young and old, expert advice and a variety of music and entertainment. Full



Geoff with camellias

details at www.thegardenshows.com

There is usually much talk in my garden from visitors when they see the pair of children's vintage horse toys on display. One is the remnants of a Moby Prairie King rocking horse that used to sit on a metal frame with springs, the other, pictured, is a Moby Bronco horse. I've read that the Moby Bronco pressed-steel toy ride-horse was first made in Erith in 1947 by David Sebel and his son, Harry. I purchased my Prairie King from an antique shop in Rye but the bronco was generously donated to the garden by a visitor several years ago. She saw mine and said she was about to emigrate and could no longer keep it and would be very happy to donate to the garden to go on display. Needless to say, I accepted and love it.

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



William Bartlett camellia