

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Scorching heat, homemade cakes and lots of guests

BACK on August 2, I shut the garden gate for another year.

I'm surprised to say, it was a highly successful season, despite the intense heat and near-drought conditions. Little did I know, when I opened the garden gate for visitors back on June 1, that the upcoming season would be one of the most challenging in the 17 years since I began, back in 2009. Despite the intense heat, 401 visitors pre-booked to see the garden; this number would have been higher, but for the cancellations of bookings, ahead of planned visits, due to the high temperatures.

Over 40 people have subsequently written glowing five-star reviews of their visit on TripAdvisor; despite the immense difficulties I encountered, keeping it looking its very best.

The garden has certainly looked quite lush at all times, and the use of many drought-tolerant plants, like the mangave pictured, has helped a great deal. Whilst the first half of the season was slow going, as the final closure date approached, there was a real rush to get to see the garden.

In the end, I baked 323 portions of my infamous homemade cakes, also much commented on by visitors on TripAdvisor: "Tea in a teapot with delicious home-made cakes – absolutely faultless." So said Dominique back in July, when visiting to celebrate her mother's birthday.

Just under half of the visitors opted to hear the story of the garden talk, prior to their visit, which I provide, so that everyone really understands how it was created and developed, and place everything in context.

There was only one day throughout the nine weeks when rain

threatened to spoil proceedings, but it never materialised. Twenty-six members of the Grafty Green Garden group in Kent were scheduled to visit on July 26; as a precaution, I had to clear out the garage and lay up tables and chairs in there and serve all the tea and cakes undercover.

Thankfully, spirits were not dampened, with organiser Sue Birch emailing after the visit: "Thank you, Geoff, for making us so welcome and giving the group a super experience. What an amazing garden; so inspirational."

There were other visitors too, like Kristen and family from California, who really loved the garden, Petra from Dortmund in Germany and Marta from Spain. Kristen was so taken with one of the fuchsias I have in a pot behind the house. She asked for cuttings to take back to the States with her. The plant was one I mentioned recently, empress of Prussia, it was the very plant that my dad had bought for mum, for their ruby wedding anniversary, many moons ago. Let's hope she can get them through customs, once back home. She has promised to send photos if they take and grow well.

I've now reconciled all the income from the garden entry, payment for garden talks and the proceeds from my tea and cake sales to finalise a magnificent total of £4,502.50 raised for the National Garden Scheme, bringing the running total raised for all charities since 2009 to a whopping £186,548.

Thank you to all those who came and visited. Next year, the National Garden Scheme celebrates 100 years, and we will open again for visitors to see the garden.

This weekend, there are a few gardens you could visit which are opening for the National Garden



Geoff and Kristen and family. Images: Geoff Stonebanks



The garden looking lush

Scheme. There is Bourne Botanicals in The Bourne, Chesterfield Close, Furnace Wood, in Felbridge near East Grinstead, which opens today (Saturday) from 11 am to 5 pm with entry £8. There's giant gunnera, spiky agave and yucca, tetrapanax, bamboo, palm trees and so many more unusual plants.

See the sunken garden with figs, peaches, canna and many frogs! All set in a lush one-acre garden with many quirky touches.

Holly House in Beaconsfield Road, Chelwood Gate, Haywards Heath, opens both today and tomorrow from 2pm to 5pm with entry £7, where you can wander

through an acre of English garden providing views and cameos of plants and trees round every corner with many different areas giving constant interest. See the fish pond and a wildlife pond beside a grassy area with many shrubs and flowerbeds. Among the trees and winding paths, there is a cottage garden which is a profusion of colour and peace.

The Tuppenny Barn in Main Road, Southbourne, west of Chichester, opens today from midday to 4 pm with entry £6. This is an iconic, organic smallholding used as an outdoor classroom to teach children about the environment, sustainability and healthy food. It covers two and a half acres featuring a wildlife pond, an orchard with heritage top fruit varieties and much more. Details on all the gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk.

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



Kristen wanting cuttings



Drought tolerant planting including mangave



Petra from Germany and friend Janice from Suffolk