

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



A Chinese Elm Bonsai



Lilies starting to shoot



A re-potted Christmas Tree

Dazzling blooms and early lily shoots in spite of the weather

IT IS still pretty cold outdoors and I have to confess to not really getting out there too much recently. Fortunately, at this time of the year there is not a lot that needs doing. That said, this week I have upgraded my outdoor Christmas tree from a large terracotta pot to a 130-litre plastic pot with two handles! I've had the tree in the garden for several years now, dressing it with fairy lights and a few baubles over the festive period. In order to keep it longer, it needed some space to grow, so its new environment should allow it to do just that and the handles mean I can move it around the patio if necessary!

There is a brand-new opening for the National Garden Scheme next Thursday, 20th. Crosslands Flower Nursery in Barnham Lane, Walberton, near Arundel opens from 10am to midday with entry £10. Pre-booking is essential however, so visit www.ngs.org.uk for information & booking. A ticket gives you a two-hour, all access tour, of a fourth generation, award-winning, sustainably run flower nursery with three acres of glasshouses filled to the brim with Sussex grown alstroemeria. Plus, there will be an opportunity to purchase flowers at the end of the tour! Pembury House in Clayton, near Ditchling, is also available to pre book next Thursday and Friday to see wonderful snowdrops and hellebores, full details on the web site.

Looking good in my lounge bay window this week are the fabulous flower heads on my *Jatropha podagrica*. We've had this plant 23 years now and it never fails to dazzle with its repeat flowering. It is a shrubby perennial with a short stout caudex and branched fleshy, spiny stems bearing leathery, three or five-lobed leaves, whitish beneath, clustered at the tips, and small bright flowers in branched terminal clusters, generally in summer. It is also known as the Guatemala rhubarb and is a superb and rarely obtainable succulent plant that will be of great interest both to succulent lovers and those looking for a

very different house plant. The flowers, which are long-lasting, are brilliant orange in colour. The plant should be watered regularly during the summer, but never leave it sitting in water for any length of time, and let the compost get quite dry before watering again. In autumn, cut back on the water, and water only rarely in winter, when the plant goes into its dormant phase and sheds its leaves. Best maintained in temperatures above 12°C and avoid placing too close to radiators, it can go out in the garden in the summer.

Back in the garden I have several bonsai trees, all of which stay out through the winter months. The one pictured is a Chinese Elm, one of 3 in my collection, all of which I have had over 30 years now. The Chinese Elm is indigenous to China and south-east Asia. In its native environment it can be a mighty tree reaching heights of up to 80 feet (25 meter). It develops a fine branch ramification with small leaves, which makes it a very suitable Bonsai plant. It thrives in either full sun and/or partial shade. In temperate climates, it can be left outdoors even during winter months. If you have an indoor Chinese Elm Bonsai you can place it outside during the summer, but it's best to bring it into a cool, but frost-free, room in the winter. The Chinese Elm can usually endure some frost but it differs depending on the region it was imported from. Trees from northern Chinese regions are more frost-hardy than those coming from southern areas. Depending on winter temperatures Chinese Elms either drop their leaves or keep them until spring when the new shoots emerge.

Starting to emerge in their containers are the first shoots of the stunning lilies I have in the garden. They are prized for their fragrant blooms and often giant, trumpet-shaped flowers. Lily bulbs, planted in both containers and flower borders make the perfect summer flowers to add colour and cheer to your plot. Asiatic lilies have a great variety of colours including yellow,

A *jatropha podagrica*

orange, red and almost-black, but they're not scented and tend to be smaller than Oriental types. They are extremely hardy, so are easier to grow, simply plant the bulbs in the garden or in pots of peat-free multi-purpose compost in a sheltered sunny spot to thrive, and a deep pot if growing in containers.

You can see me in the central gravel garden at Driftwood, where I have two very large clumps of aloe striatula. It is an extremely hardy aloe and needs no protection through the winter months.

Mine have been in the ground now for over 10 years and have done well producing pretty yellow flower stems in the summer months.

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



Geoff and some aloe striatula