

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Pigeons at home



Geoff in beach garden with a yellow vib



Driftwood gravel garden

Spring snowflakes, nice open gardens and a pair of pigeons

STILL looking pretty in my garden are the delicate bell-shaped flowers of *Leucojum vernum* or spring snowflake. This is a bulbous perennial with strap-shaped glossy dark green leaves and erect stems with one or two broadly bell-shaped, green-tipped white flowers. Snowflakes enjoy woodland conditions similar to snowdrops but flower later, establishing to form bold clumps. Mine were originally planted beneath the pear tree in the garden when we moved here back in 2004. I had to dig them up and decided to place them in two large containers, which is where they have been since and flower every spring.

There are two gardens open for the National Garden Scheme this weekend in Sussex. The first is a gorgeous National Trust Garden, Nymans in Staplefield Road, Handcross, opening for the scheme today, Saturday 15th. Gates open from 10am to 5pm with entry £19 and here children will pay £9.50. This is one of the National Trust's premier gardens with rare and unusual plant collections of national significance. At this time of year, see blossom, bulbs and a stunning collection of subtly fragrant magnolias.

The other one is Denmans Garden in Denmans Lane, Fontwell opening tomorrow, Sunday 16th from 11am to 4pm with entry £10 and children £8. Pre-booking is essential. Created by Joyce Robinson, a horticulturalist and pioneer in gravel gardening, this is the former home of influential landscape designer, John Brookes. Denmans is a Grade II registered post-war garden renowned for its curvilinear layout and complex plantings. See year-round colour, unusual plants, structure and fragrance in the gravel gardens, faux riverbeds, intimate walled garden, ponds and conservatory. On site there is a plant centre with unusual plants for sale, a gift shop and Midpines Café. Full details on both gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk

Over the last few years, we have had a pair of pigeons living in the garden, I believe nesting in a large

conifer at the top. With so many perfect spots to sit on the rusty metal work throughout the garden, they can regularly be seen taking in the view, sometimes independently but often side by side.

A very pretty and delicate shrub in the garden is just starting to come to life again. *Sorbaria sorbifolia* 'Sem' is a small, compact selection, to 1.5m, thicket-forming shrub. It has many upright stems and a distinctive leaf colouring; yellow-green flushed with bright reddish-pink and bronze in spring. Leaves become greener in summer, but redden in autumn with best colouring established if placed in good light. Its flowers are borne in stiff, erect, rather narrow panicles of small white flowers in summer. You can see mine are just starting to form. I opted to grow mine in a large container and have had it in the garden now for five years.

Two areas of my garden that can be guaranteed to look great whatever the time of year are the beach garden in front of the house and the gravel garden in the centre at the back. You can see me stood in the former, in front of the large black rowing boat that takes centre stage. In addition to the boat there are a lot of marine accents too. You can see the lifebelt, lobster pot, anchor and float all inside the boat. The main colour theme at this time of the year is a definite yellow vibe! Both the *coronilla glauca*'s pea-like yellow flowers and the vivid yellow flowers of the *helleborus argutifolius* that go so well together.

The latter, the gravel garden at the back, is such a useful addition as it requires so little maintenance all year around. You can see the palms standing really tall now. The central one, a *Butia Capita* or Jelly Palm, was planted 15 years ago and now stands over 20 feet tall. Either side are two smaller palms, *Trachycarpus fortunei* or Windmill palm. These evergreen palms form a small tree, with a stout, fibre-covered trunk bearing a terminal tuft of deeply divided, fan-shaped dark green leaves to 1m in width. Large, arching sprays of small, light-yellow flowers appear

*Sorbaria sorbifolia* 'Sem'

in summer followed by small, kidney-shaped yellow to blue-black fruits in the autumn. They can be grown in any well-drained, fertile soil in full sun or lightly dappled shade. Ideally, they need protection from strong or cold drying winds and will need protection from hard winter frosts. That said, mine have survived well for over 15 years too, despite the cold drying winds we get across the garden. I used to fleece them when they were smaller but over the last two years they have been left exposed to the elements and apart from a few wind burnt fronds, they have done well. Beneath them there are two large *Chamaerops humilis* which have grown well in the garden as well.

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

*Leucojum vernum* or spring snowflake