

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Fabulous camellia and hydrangea

With only a few weeks to go until the big day, there are already signs of the festive season appearing at home. Last year, I had two large poinsettias that were looking a little worse for wear by late January. I opted to cut them right back and hope for the best! Thankfully my hard-nosed decision has paid dividends, as both plants have flourished well, with one of them pictured, actually starting to turn red again! Poinsettia, proper name *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, is an attractive house plant with dark green leaves and leafy red 'bracts' that surround the green-yellow flowers in December and January. They're commonly used to decorate the home at Christmas. The plant is native to Mexico and they have a reputation of being tricky to keep alive after Christmas. I reckon most people throw them out after the festivities have ended. However, with a little care, and maybe a bit of luck, it's possible to keep your poinsettia alive throughout the year and even encourage red bracts and flowers to form in time for the following Christmas as I have done.

First and foremost the plant needs to be in a draught-free spot with bright, indirect light and a temperature of around 13-15°C. It needs to be watered sparingly, best when the surface of the compost has started to dry out. Experts say mist the leaves and bracts regularly to increase humidity, I can honestly say this is not something I have done. In an ideal world, to encourage flowering by Christmas, you'll need to move your poinsettia into a dark cupboard for 12 hours a day, from November, keeping an even temperature of around 18°C and making sure it's not exposed to artificial light during this time. That said, again something I have not done this year. The most important fact, if you are planning to buy one for this year, is to make sure it's in good condition and that no leaves are wilting. Avoid buying poinsettias that have been displayed near a door or even on a petrol station fore-



Geoff and camellia buds forming well

court as they simply won't last.

The other sign that the festive season is upon us is my old Christmas cacti beginning to flower. These are the ultimate living decoration, *Schlumbergera* are striking, easy to care for houseplants that bring vibrant colour and festive cheer to your indoor spaces. Known for its brilliant red, tubular blooms, this tropical cactus flowers around late autumn and into the winter, just perfect for Christmas. Its flat, segmented leafy stems arch gracefully, creating a cascading effect that looks stunning in a decorative pot. Unlike desert cacti, the Christmas Cactus thrives in bright, indirect light and prefers consistently moist (but not soggy) soil. With proper care, it

can bloom reliably every year and live for decades, often passed down through generations.

Meanwhile in the garden the fabulous camellia bushes are showing good signs of many flower buds that will start to emerge after Christmas. Camellias are popular evergreen shrubs that produce a beautiful display of flowers from late winter to early spring, when little else is in flower. There are thousands of varieties to choose from, with white, pink or red flowers, which can either be single or double. Their shiny, evergreen leaves look great all year round. In their native range of south Asia, camellias are woodland plants, so do best in shade. This makes them useful for growing in shady

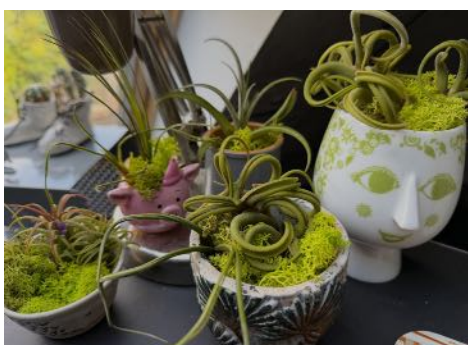
parts of the garden or as part of a woodland border. Mine are all growing on a north facing wall at the back of the house. They are acid-loving plants, which means they need to grow in acidic soil, so best grown in pots if your soil is not acidic.

Also outside, the flower heads on the hydrangea Red Baron are still looking great! This easy-to-grow hydrangea produces an abundance of rosy red mophead flowers which fade to a deeper, more subtle shade of red as they mature throughout the season. Thus extending the interest of this hardy shrub into autumn, as you can see. Because of its compact growth habit, 'Red Baron' can be grown in containers on the patio as well as in a shrub

border, my 2 plants are both in the ground. They prefer a sunny or semi shaded position, with shelter from cold, drying winds.

On my desk, I have a pretty collection of air plants. In the UK, tillandsia, as they are called, make brilliant houseplants for beginners, and may produce vibrantly coloured flowers, too. For best results, grow them in bright light out of direct sun. They enjoy high humidity, so a bright, steamy bathroom is ideal. They can be watered by dunking the whole plant in room temperature water and leaving for an hour or so.

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



Pretty air plants



Hydrangea Red Baron flower heads



Last year's poinsettia



Christmas cacti