

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Frozen alstroemeria



Frozen Yuletide



Frosty pigs

There's frost on the pigs but the plants are warm in greenhouse

A PLANT that comes into its own at this time of year is the mahonia "Winter Sun". It is so named for its beautiful yellow flower spikes that rise above the long arching stems with their glossy green, holly-like leaves through the cold winter months, bringing a ray of sunshine into the winter garden.

Not only are the flowers bright and sunny, they are highly fragrant and similar in scent to Lily of the Valley. This mid-sized, hardy evergreen shrub will grow to 4m by 2.5m height and spread and will bring a shady corner of the garden to life all year round.

Mine is planted behind the railway sleepers and is now about 3m tall. Tall mahonias that become bare at the base are easily restored by cutting back the stems to about 15cm (6in) from the ground in late winter to early spring.

While most mahonias have sharp spikes on the leaves, you can also buy "Soft Caress" which is the first mahonia of its kind with spine-free leaves, which means it can be planted near to paths or doorways without the fear of being pricked, as you might with traditional varieties that have holly-like leaves.

If you brush past these, there will be no worries about any scratches, opening up many new planting positions and ideas where you may not have considered mahonia in the past. Soft Caress is also compact and dwarf in nature.

With only a week to go until Christmas, I've donned a Christmas top to work outside.

The weather has been extremely cold and to be honest, I've not spent too much time out there, preferring to observe from my office window up in the roof.

The plants have been taking a real battering from the extreme cold, like the frozen flowers of the camellia Yuletide and the last of the alstroemeria Indian Summer.

That said, they still look striking.

Even the metal sculptures, like the pair of pigs, take on a new appeal with a frosted look.

Have you bought a real Christmas tree for the home yet? How many of us have actually succumbed to buying one online?

As a nation, we seem to spend most of our time shopping online so why not purchase your tree there too?

Whether you buy on the net or not, you will need to consider the following. It's important to know what space you have available to put it up.

Unlike artificial trees, real trees do offer the chance to trim them once home if they don't quite fit where you'd intended. So, if you have over-estimated how much space you have, they can still be cut back.

But, it's best to take off a little at a time – there's no gluing branches back on if you've been too enthusiastic with the shears.

The other "size" issue to consider is the transportation home.

Maybe you have to travel on the bus or are using the car, either way, make sure you can deal with it.

Looking for a large tree? Then maybe the online option is worth considering.

There are now companies that will both deliver and collect your tree for free, before the festive season and then in the New Year.

My favourite has always been a Nordman Fir, usually a little more expensive, but less likely to drop its needles over Christmas.

Check out the sites online, there may still be time to order one. Failing that you may have to go out and purchase one.

As a family, you may believe that choosing a tree is one of the key events of your Christmas holiday so make the experience as festive as possible and check out the locations in Sussex where you can visit and arrange to cut down your own tree to take home.

One I've visited in the past is Sussex Trees, who sell real, homegrown Christmas Trees from two locations in the county.

Its long-established Northdown Plantation is at Five Ashes, East Sussex, and their family farm at Goddenwick Farm in West Sussex and together they are home to around 120,000 trees.

At the latter, you may even come across reindeer too. They open right up until the December 23.

Back at Driftwood, I've been keeping an eye on my succulent collection through this very cold



Geoff and the mahonia

spell. I have aeoniums flowering in the back porch.

The bulk of mine however are in the heated greenhouse and I've trekked up the garden every morning just to make sure the temperature has been maintained through the night at a constant 9 degrees minimum.

Fingers crossed, so far, I have had no problems, long may it continue.

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



Aeoniums in the porch