

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Magical surprises discovered

Last month, before the open garden season really gets going and visitors come and visit Driftwood, we managed to get a week away in Norfolk.

On the way there, we stopped off at Columbine Hall in Stowupland in Suffolk to see the many changes that had been made to the estate since our last visit in 2023. The head gardener, Kate Elliott, is a Facebook friend who has spent all her adult life working with Hew Stevenson, the owner. When we last visited, Hew was telling us of several grand ideas he had to improve the garden and three new magical surprises were in store. A new wooden footbridge, which can be seen behind the three of us, set across the moat; a wonderful, newly-created walled garden, established where an old outbuilding stood, retaining its outer walls; and a stunning brick bridge across to the house. If you are planning to holiday in Suffolk this summer, why not arrange a private visit or go along to one of their two open afternoons, June 14 or September 20. Full details at www.columbinehall.co.uk

While in Norfolk, we visited many beautiful gardens, one of which was the National Trust's Felbrigg Hall. By far my favourite feature of the gardens were the two magical greenhouses, contained within the walled garden, with magnificent displays inside. I just wanted to scoop up the whole thing and deposit it in my own garden. Pictured below is the one filled with beautifully arranged succulents.

It was my birthday last month too, the main reason for going away, and I decided to treat myself to a new plant. I opted to buy a *Dasyliirion serratifolium*, better known as bear grass, also pictured below. It is a dramatic, architectural plant and ideal for a dramatic accent to your garden design. It is slow-growing with thin, fleshy green strap-like leaves which have serrated edges and are arranged perfectly in attractive symmetrical rosettes. As it matures, the plant will form a trunk. It is classed as a succulent and is tolerant of windy and coastal positions like mine. I've read that it



Kate Elliott, Hew Stevenson and Geoff. Pictures: Geoff Stonebanks

is quite a rare plant which is exceptionally beautiful and imposing but easy to maintain.

This weekend, there are several gardens you could get out to visit with the National Garden Scheme. Saturday, there are the Japanese inspired 96 Ashford Road in Hastings and Kotamaki in Tottingworth Park, Broad Oak, the latter of which needs to be pre-booked. Its entrance price of £12 includes refreshments and there will be a talk by the owners at 10.30 too.

On the 17th, there are gardens at Ashdown Park Hotel in Wych Cross, East Grinstead, and the magnificent Penns in the Rocks in Groombridge, near Tunbridge Wells. If you plan to visit, please check all the details/booking op-

tions online at www.ngs.org.uk

Looking good in my own garden this week are two plants with a hint of purple. The first is a perennial that is sure to dazzle. It is *Persicaria runcinata* 'Purple Fantasy' which boasts vibrant, semi-evergreen and decorative foliage. Each triangular, almost heart-shaped leaf features striking splashes of deep purple, silvery green, and dark veins, creating a mesmerising display of texture and colour that stands out in any planting scheme. Ideal for borders, woodland gardens, or as a dramatic weed-suppressing ground cover, 'Purple Fantasy' thrives in moist, well-drained soil in partial shade, though will happily cope with some sun. Reaching up to 60cm tall, this low-maintenance plant

will spread up to 1.5m, providing a fascinating carpet of dynamic interest throughout the growing season. Delicate spikes of soft, pale, pink-white blooms appear in late summer; providing an extra layer of beauty and charm. It is hardy, easy to care for and an eye-catching feature but can be a bit rampant.

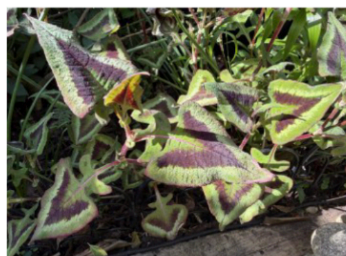
The other is *Lamium orvala* which is a clump forming perennial with attractive, heart-shaped leaves and purple-pink flowers appearing in whorls all the way up the tall stems. Its flowers are borne from April to June, hooded in appearance with intricately marked paler, speckled throats (not dissimilar to foxgloves or orchids). It is a good plant for partially shaded spots and for wood-

land gardens. It will also happily thrive beneath trees and amongst other perennials throughout the borders. Native to Central and Southern Europe the nectar rich blooms are a magnet for pollinators. Plants will readily naturalise once established to bring blankets of weed-suppression from March to November. They prefer a spot in moist, well-drained soil of any type except clay and any aspect other than south facing. More importantly they are drought tolerant once established, providing they are planted in partial to full shade. I have two nicely formed clumps in the back garden.

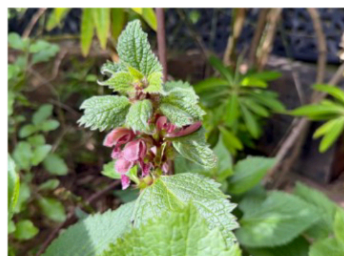
■ Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or follow both him and the garden on social media.



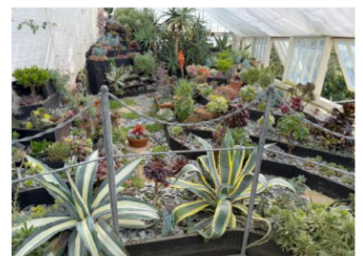
Dasyliirion serratifolium



Persicaria purple fantasy



Lamium orvala



Display greenhouse at Felbrigg Hall