

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Snowdrops at 5 Whitemans Close



Pembury house snowdrops

As winter fades, snowdrops will offer us the first signs of spring

As we edge towards Christmas, it won't be long before we start to think about the gardens opening for the National Garden Scheme in 2023.

The scheme has recently launched its publicity for the annual Snowdrop Festival. We're all probably going to eat more than we should over the coming festive period, so the New Year will be the perfect time to get out and exercise in the fresh air and enjoy the beautiful, faithful, first signs of spring, which are inevitably, epitomised by drifts of glorious snowdrops.

They are indeed a reminder of the changing seasons and the promise of what's to come. So, what better way to shake off winter and celebrate the gardening visiting year ahead than with the National Garden Scheme's 2023 Snowdrop Festival.

These glorious harbingers of the wonderful life of gardens to come can be viewed in over 100 National Garden Scheme gardens throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland during January, February and March. Here in Sussex, we have about ten gardens for you to see these beautiful flowers, notably Pembury House in Clayton and 5 Whitemans Close in Cuckfield.

On a wintry day, there is nothing better than visiting a garden gleaming with one of the earliest flowering plants of the year. Whether you enjoy carpets of naturalised white in woodlands, meticulously grown rare varieties of snowdrops or gardens boasting a colourful mix of snowdrops, hellebores and other early spring flowers, there is something for galanthophiles and garden enthusiasts alike.

The scheme has just published some fun facts about this delicate little flower. Here are a few to whet your appetite.

It's a Greek name – "Galanthus" translates as "milk flower" but could you have possibly imagined that a single Galanthus plicatus "Golden Fleece" sold for £1,390 on eBay in 2015?

Snowdrops are tough little plants, adapted to pierce through snow and survive the cold. The tips of their leaves are especially hardened for

breaking through frozen ground and their sap contains a form of antifreeze that prevents ice crystals from forming. A naturally occurring substance within the plant, called galantamine, is used to help treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, although the bulbs themselves are poisonous.

There are more than 2,500 varieties of snowdrop and they are symbolic of spring, purity and religion. Collecting snowdrop bulbs in the wild is illegal in many countries. For many, you need a license to sell snowdrop bulbs, as they're covered by CITES regulations – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna. It's illegal to transfer them over borders, without a CITES permit too.

The snowdrop isn't a UK native. They became fashionable in the Victorian era but, due to it being known under several different names, no one knows for sure when they were first introduced to the UK. The first records of plants in the wild date from 1778 – but botanist John Gerard is said to have described the snowdrop in his writings from 1597.

So, now you know, why not visit a National Garden Scheme garden as part of its Snowdrop Festival to see hundreds of different varieties of snowdrops. Full details at www.ngs.org.uk

Meanwhile, in my own garden, I gave you the lowdown on the redesign of the area adjacent to the shed last week and when the weather has been OK, I have been outside looking at repositioning much of the sculpture in the garden to accommodate the new design and more importantly to try and generate a different look overall for visitors to see next summer.

Once my garden closes in the late summer, I'm always thinking about what small changes can be made to help create a slightly different feel to the plot for visitors the following year. Sometimes it's small, cosmetic changes and other times bigger projects, depending on how my imagination runs riot.

The same rule of thumb would be true for me, whether I opened the garden to others or not, because it's important, in my book, to have the



Relocating sculpture

garden looking the best it can, be it for friends and family or paying visitors.

In readiness for the 2023 season, regular readers will recall that I've slightly changed the beach garden too, as the old wooden boat had rotted away over ten years.

Many wonder how to make a big difference in the garden for a small outlay. This has been something I've tried to do every one of the past 15 years. My garden has always been made up of many small components, be they sculptural pieces to be relocated around the plot creating a different feel or new ideas or themes to change a corner or vista across the garden. I always describe my garden to visitors as an eclectic mix of rubbish with a few plants!

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



Snowdrops and hellebores at Pembury House