

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Robins, berries and early blooms

The year is getting off to a racing start, mid-January already.

Starting to look great in pots in my back garden are the pretty bell flowers of *Leucojum* snowflake. They are easy to grow and multiply freely in most gardens provided the soil is moist enough. They have been known to withstand flooding and standing water, so are an ideal choice for bog gardens and pond-side plantings. You can see they have dark green leaves and wide white flowers with green markings.

These were actually planted in my garden under a pear tree, back in 2004, when we moved in and I dug them up and planted them in containers, now located on the patio behind the house.

I have a plentiful supply of *Euphorbia characias* in both the front and back garden. It is a wonderful architectural perennial, perfect for adding that real touch of drama to your borders. Its bluish-green foliage looks fresh all year round, and in early summer it's joined by large, dome-shaped, lime-yellow flowers that tower above it. That said, you can already see some flowers forming on the clump pictured, growing in the front of the beach garden, very early! It's ideal for growing in a sunny border or gravel garden, and is a good planting partner for *Kniphofia*, which bear orange and yellow flowers. For best results grow them in moist but well-drained soil, in full sun.

It is best to cut down the flower stems to ground level as the blooms fade. Wear gloves and be careful when handling the plant as the thick, white sap can irritate the eyes and skin. Strange how the clumps elsewhere in the garden are a long way from showing flower heads!

Guaranteed to offer a splash of bright colour through the winter months are the stand-out berries on *Pyracantha* 'Orange Glow', otherwise known as Firethorn. The shrub is a spiny evergreen known for its vibrant, long-lasting orange berries in autumn and winter, providing food for



Greenery in the winter. All images: Geoff Stonebanks

birds and a strong visual impact. It produces fragrant white flowers in spring, attracting pollinators and its dense, thorny branches make excellent security barriers or informal hedges. This hardy plant is versatile for sunny spots, thriving in well-drained soil as a specimen, espalier, or dense screen.

I have two plants, one close to the front door and one right at the top of the garden. I'm surprised more berries have not been taken by the birds. Considering we are in the depths of winter there is still a wide range of green hues throughout the garden. You can see me standing on the central path at the back of the house and the greenery looks magnificent, especially set

against the clear blue sky of a cold winter's day!

This week I have arranged for a contractor to come in and trim all the tall boundary hedges on both sides of the garden. To be honest, it used to be a job I did myself but age takes its toll and it's much easier watching others do it now. Thankfully, it only really needs a good trim once a year and it is then more manageable for me to keep it in check for the rest of the time.

A pretty grass still looking good at the moment is the *Miscanthus nepalensis*, which is a deciduous ornamental grass that grows up to 1m in height with arching, linear green leaves from spring to autumn, often turning bronze in winter, as you can see.

It bears terminal panicles of pale-yellow spikelets in summer, forming into yellow seed-heads in autumn, finally turning brown-yellow in winter.

A really lovely grass to have in the garden. It is native to the Himalayas and Myanmar and is ideal for growing in sunny borders and gravel gardens. For best results grow *Miscanthus nepalensis* in a sheltered spot.

It is best protected from frost in winter but mine has survived fine for two winters now.

Cut clumps back to ground level in spring to make way for new growth.

We need to ensure our gardens are great spaces for birds, especially at this time of the year!

Birds can make gardens even

more beautiful and it can be so magical to sit outdoors in the summer and hear a song thrush or great tit calling from flowering lilac trees.

I reckon it can give as much pleasure as growing perfect flowers.

When a robin sings a wistful little tune at this time of year, doesn't that make winter more bearable?

I seem to have quite a few robins in the garden throughout the year and have been doing my best to keep them well fed, especially through the current colder weather.

You can read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or follow him and the garden on social media.



Miscanthus nepalensis



Pyracantha



Euphorbia



Leucojum vernum