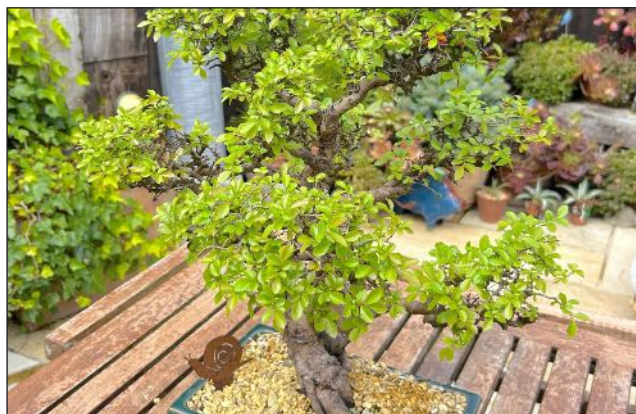


The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Bonsai tree

Image: Geoff Stonebanks



Pollinator-friendly plants

Image: Geoff Stonebanks



Lamium orvala

Bonsai and pollinator-friendly plants are 'garden treasures'

I HAVE been very lucky over the years with my collection of bonsai trees. The one pictured is my oldest one, at almost 40 years old.

It is a Chinese Elm and was acquired in the early 1990s, when it was about 10 years old. It is indigenous to China and south-east Asia. In its native environment it can be a mighty tree reaching heights of up to 25 metres. It develops a fine branch ramification with small leaves, which makes it a very suitable Bonsai plant. It thrives in either full sun and/or partial shade. If you have an indoor Chinese Elm Bonsai you can place it outside during the summer, but it's best to bring it into a cool, but frost-free, room in the winter. The tree can usually endure some frost but it differs depending on the region it was imported from.

Trees from northern Chinese regions are more frost-hardy than those coming from southern areas. Depending on winter temperatures they either drop their leaves or keep them until spring when the new shoots emerge. I find it best to ignore labels stating your Chinese elm needs watering every day, in my experience, you need to water on observation. Wait until the topsoil is dry, and then water generously, making sure the entire root-mass is watered. I have another two smaller Chinese Elms, a bonsai Olive tree, a Rhododendron Wren and a small conifer I have grown from seed. Mine all stay out throughout the winter months too.

I've got a large Mahonia "Winter Sun" growing behind the railway sleepers, a great plant which will provide nectar and pollen for bees and the many other types of pollinating insects. It's a compact evergreen shrub of upright growth, up to three metres tall, with long, spiny, pinnate dark green leaves. It has small flowers, bright yellow, fragrant, in densely clustered arching racemes, followed by blue-black berries as pictured now in my garden. Up close, the powerful flower perfume fills the air with a jasmine-like scent attracting early pollinators such as

bumblebees who seek them out in the sunshine. This Mahonia will grow well in a shady spot in well-drained fertile soil.

A new addition this year has been a Rhododendron "Madame Albert van Hecke". This is an evergreen azalea with a relatively upright habit and small ovate leaves that open bright green and mature to dark green. It produces masses of small, rose-pink flowers, pictured, in late spring and is an ideal candidate for container planting on your patio, although is just as effective in a large bed or border among other plants. This hardy dwarf shrub is easy to grow and care for and will add colour to your garden all year long. Mine is in a large container at the back of the house.

A favourite of mine in the garden at this time of the year is Lamium orvala, pictured, they are commonly known as dead nettles and are an interesting group of plants that superficially resemble stinging nettles. In fact, they don't have any stinging ability and their resemblance to stinging nettles is to deter herbivores from eating them.

Species can be annuals or perennials, with many valued for their ground cover abilities, pollinator-friendly flowers and preference of shady areas. From mid-spring and into summer it produces pretty sage-like flowers that are a warm purple-pink colour. It has a clump-forming growth habit and achieves best results grown in moist, well-drained soil in partial shade. I have successfully grown it in a large container in the past too.

Having been discharged from hospital just over 48 hours after being admitted for knee replacement surgery earlier in the month, I am now able to potter around the garden using crutches, which means I still can't do too much, other than supervise my partner to water plants as I direct. Frustrating for both of us, I can tell you! More importantly I have to be very careful where I place the crutches to avoid going head over heels!

Fortunately, I have many succulents and drought tolerant plants which makes it all a little



Geoff on crutches in the garden

Image: Geoff Stonebanks

easier. These need virtually no attention all through the summer which makes them a great addition. That, coupled with the scores of others dressing both the front and back gardens, does make the overall task of watering much easier.

This weekend, there are quite a few gardens open for the National Garden Scheme. You could visit 96 Ashford Road in Hastings, Legsheath Farm in Forest Row, or a brand-new garden, The White House in Redbridge Lane, Crowborough. I have delayed opening, due to my knee operation until June 16. Check out all the details at www.ngs.org.uk

■ Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or book a visit before August 3 by emailing visitdriftwood@gmail.com.



Mahonia winter sun