

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Reclaimed metal fireplace



Two new planters



Aloe babies to be planted

I call my garden an eclectic mix of rubbish with a few plants

EVERYONE who has visited my garden will know that my best description of it to others is “an eclectic mix of rubbish with a few plants”.

That description has come about thanks to the large range of reclaimed objects I have used around the plot.

Good examples are the three rusty metal sculptures pictured in my column a couple of weeks ago.

This week, I've been deciding where to put my latest acquisitions, picked up while we were in Suffolk last month.

We visited a reclamation yard on the outskirts of Bury St Edmunds and I fell in love with a small rusty metal fireplace.

I used to have a large wooden one at the top of the garden, donated by a neighbour. I placed an old metal fire grate in front of it.

It lasted quite a few summers but finally I had to discard it a couple of years ago, as it was falling apart.

The grate survived and looks wonderful in front of the new one. Once spring arrives, I'll secure it to the sleepers, plant it up and dress the mantel with some small pots of succulents. Watch this space.

Also acquired that day were two pretty painted drainpipe tops.

They had masses of them, ranged across a wall for display and I picked up two of them that will look impressive this summer, once I've decided on a home for them and chosen what to plant in them.

Once again though, I think they will be best displayed against the colouring of the railway sleepers or maybe on a brick wall further up the garden.

Back at the end of January, I mentioned a great houseplant I had bought from Hampton Court Flower Show many years ago.

It was Aloe Zebrina which is a remarkably easy succulent with saw-like leaves and incredibly vibrant red/orange edges that streak up the plant.

It is closely related to Aloe Vera but without the same medicinal properties, it's simply an ornamental plant that will grow up to be a gigantic monster, standing over 4ft tall if given the right amount of time and sunshine.

This plant will produce an

abundance of smaller “pups” around its base, which you can either remove and pot on their own, or leave with the mother plant to create a larger clump of aloe.

You can see mine had developed four small pups around its base and I decided to harvest them and create four new plants which I will probably sell this summer as I already have several other larger plants around the house from this same plant.

They are compact plants and a perfect example for beginners as they are so easy to look after.

Bright indirect light will promote the best growth and only water once the soil is completely dry and then give a heavy water. In autumn and winter, cut back on the watering but do not let it dry out completely.

Avoid a humid atmosphere and in the warmer months, perhaps open a window or door occasionally, so it can enjoy the fresh air.

The experts say, repot every year or two, into a slightly larger pot using cacti compost.

You might find it easier to tackle if you concertina a couple of sheets of newspaper and then fold these around the spines, leaving a “tail” that you can use to lift the plant out of one pot and into another. Otherwise invest in some thorn-proof gloves as the fleshy leaves can be a bit sharp.

Another lovely house plant is the sinningia leucotricha, also known as Brazilian Edelweiss. It has large silvery foliage and makes an excellent houseplant. Mine sits on an east facing bathroom window ledge and has been there probably ten years now.

Over time the plant forms a woody caudex (woody base of a perennial plant), and this is one of the features that makes it a good houseplant.

The caudex stores moisture and makes the plant more tolerant of neglect, not that it is neglected in my household.

It has just started to produce two new stems with utterly gorgeous, delicate orange flowers on.

The plant does not like temperatures below 10C, so it needs to be kept indoors in the UK and possibly placed outside on hot summer days.



Geoff and Aloe Zebrina plus babies

The soil should provide good drainage to prevent the root rot. Sinningia leucotricha has a dormant period after flowering and comes into growth in early spring. After this period of dormancy, the tuber will send up new growth and the cycle will repeat.

Most plants will produce new and better growth after a period of dormant inactivity.

Mine has reliably produced stems of flowers every year since I purchased it.

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



Sinningia leucotricha