

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Hard frost on euphorbia mellifera Image: Geoff Stonebanks



Frozen roses Image: Geoff Stonebanks



Frosty coronilla Image: Geoff Stonebanks

## It may be cold but gardens can still be full of energy and colour

**W**ELL, the mild run up to Christmas certainly went out of the window in January with some incredibly cold weather hitting us all, thankfully not as bad as the rest of the country, further north.

You can see three images of frozen plants pictured in my garden, early one morning, following a heavy frost! The beautiful Tess of the D'Urberville rose that I mentioned last week still looks glamorous when frozen, as does the delicate coronilla glauca.

My office window, in the roof, is a great place to look out at the frozen garden, without actually having to go out and work in it. On the colder days I just go out and check the temperature in the greenhouse, to make sure the heater has kicked in and maintained an even temperature for the more delicate plants stored in there. You can see all the frost that forms on the tops of the railway sleepers and the square wooden table.

The euphorbia mellifera looks completely frozen. Otherwise known as the honey spurge, it is a handsome, semi-evergreen shrub native to Madeira and the Canary Islands. It has become a popular garden plant for its honey-scented summer flowers, which are popular with bees, attractive domed growth habit and waxy leaves.

Euphorbia mellifera can be grown in full sun or partial shade, and will vary in habit depending on the sunlight it receives. In full sun it will develop a denser, more compact shape and in shadier spots a looser and taller habit. It looks brilliant growing in exotic borders or gravel gardens. It can be pruned back hard in spring if it starts to get too leggy, but remember to wear gloves when pruning, as the milky white sap can irritate the skin and eyes. Trust me, come spring, it won't look any worse for wear after being frozen.

The National Garden Scheme's website for this year's garden openings is now up and running. The first 2025 gardens begin to open later this month for the

revered annual snowdrop events. It really is amazing how many visitors brave the weather each year to go and see them. 5 Whitmans Close in Cuckfield, opens by arrangement only, for pre-booked visitors, on Saturday 25th, Monday 27th, Wednesday 29th and Friday 31st January between 11am and 3.30 pm. This garden shows that winter need not be dull as there is much to see and enjoy in the depths of the season. The owner has collected many single and double snowdrops, hellebores, bulbs and other winter treasures, some not widely known. See the enormous Daphne bholua that scents the garden for weeks on end at this time of year. Please phone 01444 473520 or email shirley.carmanmartin@ngs.org.uk for information & booking. Homemade teas are included in the entrance price of £8.50. Full details can be found at [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk) along with its February open days too.

January is a good month, on dry crisp days, to clear away soggy, collapsed stems of perennials and compost/discard them. It is the beginning of the gardening year and a time for fresh starts, renewed energy, and grand plans for the twelve months ahead. Jobs are mostly about keeping things trim and tidy. If you're itching to get growing, there are a few things you can do besides the obvious planting bare root roses, chitting first early potatoes and starting off your sweet pea seeds. I've been busy trimming brown leaves on my hellebores to show the flowers to best advantage.

February is normally the month that the patio at the back of my house comes alive with beautiful camellias. That said, one elegant and perfectly formed, single flower had already appeared before the heavy frosts. Being close to the house though it managed to survive.

Though roses top the charts for romance, maybe you bought some for your loved one for Valentine's Day, these are equally dreamy flowers that bloom early! The ruffled flowers could easily be mistaken for a rose, if it weren't for the glossy, deep bottle-green foliage that makes it worth



First camellia Image: Geoff Stonebanks

growing as a stand-alone evergreen shrub all year round. The blooms are particularly appealing and generally last through to March. I've got six shrubs in both pink and white that really liven up the outlook at this time of the year. They thrive in acidic soil, so benefit from being in a container or raised bed with other acid loving plants and shrubs. They can survive in neutral soil if needed too. Raised beds, made from old railway sleepers, work really well. Make sure you fill the beds with good ericaceous potting compost and if you plan to top off, use bark chippings. Other plants that work well with them are native primroses and pulmonarias which finish off the woodland look.

Read more of Geoff's garden at [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk)



Backdrop of a frosty garden Image: Geoff Stonebanks