

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Panorama of sleeper area

My greenhouse plants heaved a sigh of relief as they were freed

I HAVE recently returned from a short holiday in Northumberland where we visited quite a few gardens. It was extremely cold though but mainly dry. On the way up we stopped off at Belvoir Castle, near Grantham, and thoroughly enjoyed the majestic garden set around the beautiful castle. What's more, it was dog friendly too so Chester enjoyed the visit as well. You can see us both, well wrapped up against the cold, standing in the rose garden there.

Returning home, there has been much to do to prepare the garden for its first booked visitors on June 1, which is now only two weeks away. Most years I have transferred all my succulent collection from the house and greenhouse in mid-April. Last year however, we got a really cold spell before the end of April so I decided to play safe this year and wait until after the holiday.

I reckon they were all breathing a sigh of relief to be let out of the cramped space into the daylight and fresh air. You can see many of them sitting on the patio, after I had fastidiously tidied each container, removed dead leaves and replaced a few plants where necessary.

I dress three areas of the garden at the back, to the side of the summer house, a small selection planted in a raised bed halfway up the garden and the main display set against the old railway sleepers on the patio at the back of the house which you can see in the panorama image at the top of the page.

This piece of theatre looks amazing, once all the individual pots are positioned.

It can take me several hours to get it just right, moving them until I feel happy with the arrangement. Once the plants are in situ, I place various pieces of sculpture among them to finish the display.

You can see several of my bonsai trees add to the finished look as well.

If you want to get out and visit some gardens this weekend then there are several openings across the county for the National Garden Scheme.

Today, Saturday, 96 Ashford Road in Hastings opens the garden gate between 1.30pm and 4.30pm.

There is a new garden opening in Pulborough today too, The Cottage in Potts Lane, between 10am and 6pm but here you must pre-book your visit online.

There are two gardens opening today between 2.30pm and 5pm. The first is Forest Ridge in Paddockhurst Lane in Balcombe and the second, Meadow Farm in Blackgate Lane, Pulborough. Forest Ridge also opens on Sunday too.

Tomorrow you could visit Champs Hill in Waltham Park Road, Coldwaltham between 2pm and 5pm or Legsheath Farm, near Forest Row, between 2pm and 4.30pm. Finally in Haywards Heath, 47 Denmans Lane opens tomorrow between 1pm and 5pm. Full details and direction on all gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk

Next week sees the world-famous Chelsea Flower Show taking place and the National Garden Scheme has a show garden for you to visit. The scheme is one of the charities being supported by Project Giving Back and the garden has been designed by eight times Chelsea Gold Medal winner, Tom Stuart-Smith.

After the show, the garden will be relocated to form part of the new garden at Maggie's at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge.

To mark the annual event most gardeners may well have heard the phrase the Chelsea Chop, but what is it and what does it mean?

It's a pruning technique used at this time of the year which helps to control and limit the size and flowering season of many herbaceous plants.

According to the RHS, there are three suggestions or methods to ensure the Chelsea chop is effective.

Which method you choose will depend on the type of plant, how big your plant clump is and the effect you want to achieve:

- Clumps of perennials can literally be chopped back by one third to a half, using shears or secateurs.

This will delay the flowering until later in the summer and keep plants shorter and more compact.

- If you have several clumps of



Geoff and Chester in the garden at Belvoir Castle

one plant, try cutting back some of them, but leaving others.

This will prolong the overall flowering time as some will flower early and the others later.

- Another method is to cut half the stems back at the front of an established clump, which will extend the season of flowering rather than delay it.

After you've cut back your plants, make sure you give them a thorough watering and some feed.

With only a couple weeks to go now until my garden welcomes its first paying visitors, I've been busy baking a supply of cakes for the freezer as well as gardening.

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



Succulents from greenhouse