

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Keep your garden looking lovely even during a hosepipe ban

AS the impact of the current hosepipe ban begins to bite, now might be a good time to consider more drought-tolerant plants for your patio and garden. Succulents generally fit this bill, as plants with thick leaves in which they store moisture. Although they are very accepting of dry conditions, succulents do need water, especially during the growing season.

If you are a novice, begin with plants that are easy and foolproof to grow. In this country, many will need to be brought inside or into a heated greenhouse for the winter months. If growing a succulent outside, start with plant choices like sedum and sempervivum, which are easy to grow and adaptable to bright, sunny locations or even slightly dappled areas.

Whatever types of plants you choose, succulents need well-drained soil. They can thrive in cracks and crevices, rockeries, and sandy or gritty soils. Succulents here will do best in containers that can be brought indoors for the winter. I have created a raised succulent bed with aeoniums and keep the plants in plastic containers, which I bury in the grit and then lay stones across the surface, so they look as though they are planted in the ground. Each autumn I can lift the pots out and return them to the safety of the greenhouse.

I have large specimen aeoniums, which I carefully arrange against the side of my summer house, using stands and bricks to display on different levels, creating a wonderfully eye-catching feature.

The new "kid on the block" is the beautiful mangave which is relatively new. It's a cross between the genus manfreda and agave. These rare hybrids combine the best of both worlds: the better growth rate and the interesting patterns of manfreda and the habit and refinement of agave.

I fell in love with them almost immediately and invested in a large specimen.

Moonglow: This succulent has the surreal look of a moonlit night. It has one-inch wide, silvery blue-green leaves that practically glow

with huge, contrasting dark purple spots to complete the effect. The spots will be more dramatic when exposed to more UV light levels from the sun. The long, flat leaves are held rigidly straight from the base, forming a low, wide, and spiky habit. Tiny spines line the margins and terminal spines are relatively soft to the touch and are much less lethal than agave varieties. Mine looks great in a planter on a stand in the garden surrounded by some smaller varieties.

One is Mission to Mars. This is a common nickname for Mars, the Red Planet. This mangave gets its name due to the unique, intense red coloration from the leaves. The thick green leaves are heavily speckled with burgundy red, with spots that bleed into each other for an overall red appearance. The red coloration is brought out best in direct UV light and. The 12in long leaves form an arching habit, caused by the tips of the leaves curving downward. Margins curl upward to show off its cinnamon spines, a nice colour to complement the red.

My latest acquisition is a smaller plant, Lavender Lady which is a unique, feminine beauty whose solitary rosette habit and smoky purple coloration make it look very similar to an Echeveria. In direct sunlight, smoky purple leaves are formed at the top of the rosette and have subdued burgundy purple dots. As the rosette ages, the ovate leaves lighten to green, forming a two-tone effect. Each 1.5 inch wide leaf has a cinnamon brown terminal spine. The margins are lined with tiny white spines and running your fingers along them feels like a comb, as they are fairly benign.

This weekend the National Garden Scheme has several gardens open locally. Butlers Farmhouse, Butlers Lane in Herstmonceux opens both today and tomorrow between 2pm and 5pm, with admission £5. A real bonus this weekend will be that you can listen to live jazz while taking in the garden and enjoying your tea and cakes. It is quite a quirky plot with surprises around every corner including a poison garden, secret jungle and rainbow border.



Top row from left, aeoniums, Moonglow and Mission to Mars, succulents. Above, Geoff with Lady Lavender and, right, butia capita

You are welcome to take your own picnic to enjoy in the garden too. Also open this weekend is Holly House in Beaconsfield Road, Chelwood Gate, near Haywards Heath. The garden will be open between 2pm and 5pm with entry £6. On show will be an acre of English garden, providing views and cameos of plants and trees around every corner; dogs on leads allowed too. Full details on both gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk.

Looking rather splendid in my garden this week is an emerging flower head on the large butia capita (Jelly palm) in the centre of my gravel garden. It looks quite pre-historic, but beautiful. Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk

