

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Camellia



Snowdrops at Pembury House



Hellebores at Pembury House

Nearly time for the glamorous camellias to put on their show

JANUARY is a great month to plan what you want to do in your garden year. Put some of your new year enthusiasm to good use by cleaning pots, tools, water butts and greenhouses in preparation for the oncoming spring. They are certainly not the most glamorous of tasks, but it will set you up for a great growing season, trust me.

I've had to discard the temporary greenhouse at the top of the garden as the horrendous gales of late, sadly, started to rip it to shreds, despite me trying, without any success, to tape the damaged areas. The large containers that were inside, have now been placed in the side alley, under cover. It was just a difficult task wheeling them there down the steps.

The newly created area by the shed has really surprised me. This is its first full winter planted up and it is looking really great, providing a fabulous view out to the garden from the kitchen. The sandstone patio is going to need a deep clean in the spring, but that aside it looks as good as new.

I've got a couple of large grape vines in the garden, one concealing the garden shed and the other across the front of the studio at the top of the garden.

To be honest, they were not really planted to gather the crops of grapes each year but more to provide the greenery and soften the impact of the garden buildings within the plot.

However, that said, we have picked grapes some years if the weather has been kind and produced a good crop. This time of the year is a very good time to prune them, while they are dormant. Once, and if, the warmer weather eventually arrives, their sap will start to rise and there is a risk they might bleed badly when cut.

Generally, vines will produce fruit on the side shoots developed from last year's growth. The guide books say that by restricting growth and the number of shoots, you should get a much better quality crop.

Starting to look beautiful in the garden, with a promise of lots of gorgeous flowers, are the several pots of camellias at the back of the

house. There are many pops of pink and white all ready to open up before too long. They are ideal for containers and their showy flowers come in whites, pinks and reds and appear early in the season; a time when not much else is flowering.

Among the most glamorous shrubs, camellias are upright or spreading, glossy-leaved evergreens, impressive in shrub borders, they are also ideal for containers and you can also grow them more informally in light woodland beneath deciduous trees.

They are found in tropical and subtropical areas in eastern and southern Asia, from the Himalayas east to Japan and Indonesia and look great in our gardens in the UK too.

Each year the National Garden Scheme starts the garden visiting season with its inspirational snowdrop and spring flower gardens.

Hundreds of gardens sprinkled with snowdrops – these delightful harbingers of spring – and wonderful, colour contrasting spring blooms including the bright gold of aconites and soft purple of crocus, open their gates to the public from late January through February and into March.

After the long, dark winter months, the appearance of these beautiful early spring flowers really lifts the spirits and heralds the start of all the wonderful gardens to come.

Year on year more and more people discover the joys of these late winter/early spring garden visits, many of which are accompanied by tea and cake or a warming bowl of soup. The scheme's expert garden owners are also on hand to share their top tips of how to grow snowdrops with many selling a good selection of varieties too.

There's nothing better than getting out into nature after a long, dark winter to discover that nature is waking up for the wonderful year ahead.

If you haven't already thought about visiting a National Garden Scheme snowdrop garden this year yet, why not check out Pembury House in Clayton.

They have one of the best collections in East Sussex and are



The damaged temporary greenhouse

open by arrangement through February and March. Check dates at www.ngs.org.uk Pre-booking is essential for all visits.

Depending on the vagaries of the season, hellebores and snowdrops are at their best in the next two months. It is a country garden, tidy but not manicured with new work always going on.

A number of winding paths give a choice of walks through three acres of garden, which is in and enjoys views of the South Downs National Park.

It is advisable to wear suitable footwear and macs with winter woollies are strongly advised. Entry is £11 per person with children allowed free and refreshments are included in the entrance fee.

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



The patio area