

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Spotlight on charity openings

I recently went into the BBC Radio Studios in Tunbridge Wells to meet up with Pat Marsh from *Sunday Gardening*.

I started the process of preparing the sessions broadcast through the season about the gardens opening for the National Garden Scheme across the county. We had a photo session for some new images to use on social media through the summer, one of which is pictured, of me sitting at the DJ's desk holding a copy of the Sussex County Booklet. For both February and March (Sunday 1) this will be a monthly session and then from March 29, they will be broadcast weekly, as the number of gardens opening increases. They usually go out at about 11.40 if you want to catch them and learn what gardens are opening.

There are no gardens open this weekend but you could pre-book a visit to the Old Vicarage in Washington next Thursday, or see if tickets are still available to visit Pembury House next Thursday or Friday. Full details of both gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk.

That said, you could decide to pop along to Bates Green Garden in Tye Hill Road, Arlington, which begins its annual Wednesday and Saturday openings next week too, right through until October 28. Full details at www.batesgreengarden.co.uk.

I love ferns in the garden; some, such as *Asplenium bulbiferum*, produce bulbils which are small, asexual reproductive structures (like tiny bulbs or plantlets) that form on the fronds of the parent plant. They develop in the leaf axils. The image shows the first stage. You can see the new growth developing. You can then remove the frond, cut away the edges and plant up as a new fern.

It is a simple process to remove a bilbil-laden frond. Put some seed compost in a seed tray and water. Pin the frond flat onto the compost with small hooks of garden wire. Put the whole seed tray in a clear plastic bag and seal the end. Leave the seed tray in a light and warm place and



Geoff Stonebanks at BBC Sussex

look out for signs that the bulbils have rooted. Once rooted, carefully lift out the new ferns and pull them away from the parent frond. Pot them on and keep them moist. An easy way to generate more plant stock.

Starting to come into their own in the garden are the gorgeous camellias. I have five large containers planted up that sit on the cold north-facing wall at the back of the house: reds, pinks and a white pictured. Camellias are popular evergreen shrubs that produce a beautiful display of flowers from late winter to early spring, when little else is in flower.

There are thousands of varieties to choose from, which can either be single or double. Their

shiny, evergreen leaves look great all year round. In their native range of South Asia, camellias are woodland plants, so they do best in shade. This makes them useful for growing in shady parts of the garden, like my north wall, or as part of a woodland border. Camellias are acid-loving plants, which means they need to grow in acidic soil, ideally with a pH of around 6 to 6.5. If you're unsure whether you have acid soil or not, you can do a soil test.

Alternatively, simply look at neighbouring gardens and see which plants are growing. If rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias are abundant, you will almost certainly have acidic soil. If they are not growing then

you are likely to have alkaline soil and won't be able to grow camellias in the ground. However, some camellia varieties can be grown in pots of ericaceous compost like mine.

Looking pretty still in the beach garden are the delicate pink flowers on the elephant's ears growing in the gravel. Most bergenia produce only one flush of flowers starting around March and lasting until the end of April or early May. One or two varieties send up further flower stems later in summer, which is useful as few other shade-loving plants produce flowers at this time. They produce clusters or sprays of large bell-shaped flowers that sit above the leaves on strong, upright stems that

are often tinged red. The colours range from white to the deepest magenta and they will grow in almost any situation, sun through to shade, and are long-lived, easy to look after and needing little attention.

Since I put the new bird feeder at the back, I have noticed that more and more robins are returning to enjoy the garden again. It is so lovely to see them follow you around as you work, in the hope of you turning up some worms or other food for them. They always seem to be there watching what you are doing.

■ Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or follow both him and the garden on social media.



Bergenia. Pictures: Geoff Stonebanks



White camellia



New fern plants



Watchful robin