

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Damaged agaves



Hellebore argutifolius



Leucojum snowflake

Atrocious weather takes its toll on agaves, which have rotted

REGULAR readers of this column will perhaps remember that I made a conscious decision to plant some of my really large agave Americana into the ground last spring.

The beach garden at the front of the house is on chalk, so I had not expected them to get too water logged through the winter and they certainly do not mind really cold weather.

Prior to planting, I had always kept them in large containers and struggled to carry them from the garden to undercover protection through the winter months.

I realised last year that it was becoming more and more difficult, with my advancing years, to be able to continue this practice. I did make sure all the smaller containers were moved into the dry as usual, which, thankfully, are all doing very well.

You can imagine my immense disappointment recently, to spend time in the garden, after all the pretty atrocious weather we've had in the last couple of months to find that several of them had started to rot. A couple, like the one pictured with me, had completely rotted, right through to the crown and ultimately had to be discarded.

The three large ones, located behind the rowing boat, have been very badly marked, with the fleshy, spiny leaves becoming brown in places, the crown still remaining undamaged.

Fingers crossed they may still recover. Obviously, I am extremely disappointed, but as one of my followers on social media said, "that's very sad Geoff, but maybe if you don't have room inside for the big plants but you have smaller ones inside, then that was really the right call". Perhaps they were right.

Other followers have suggested trying to cover them in situ through the winter months, but the strength of the winds sometimes across the front garden really precludes me even attempting that I fear.

I am just going to have to continue moving smaller plants, spring and autumn, and risk losing the larger ones if the weather is really bad.

A fun little Christmas gift that

will go out in the garden through the summer is a bee bath. To be honest I had never seen one before but a friend bought it in British Columbia and brought it back as a gift.

Reading up about them online, once filled up, your bee bath needs to be placed in a location they will notice.

The best solution is to position near plants they like to visit and it will get noticed very quickly.

You will also need to place it in a location where it is sunny most of the day as cold water can lower a pollinator's body temperature, thereby reducing their ability to fly.

Growing behind the boat in the beach garden is a very large clump of hellebore argutifolius, which is an evergreen perennial, growing to about one metre with stout stems that bear leaves composed of three spiny-toothed dark green leaflets.

Bowl-shaped, nodding, pale green flowers, 4cm to 5cm in width are borne in large open clusters.

The plant thrives well in neutral to alkaline soils that are moist, fertile and humus-rich.

Partial shade is ideal but they can tolerate full sun, as mine will attest, facing due south in the garden. All the experts say, provide shelter from strong, cold winds. That being said, mine are in a very exposed location and have continued to do well for the last eight years.

It is recommended to mulch annually in the autumn. Its pale green flowers, almost luminescent at times, hang above leathery, prickly-edged, sea-green leaves from January through until March.

This popular evergreen, also called a Corsican hellebore, makes an architectural statement in the middle of a mixed or shrub border.

Mine are planted in gravel and stand out well all year round.

The handsome foliage is a long-lasting source of interest, long after the flowers have passed.

A lovely little flower that grows well at this time of the year is the Leucojum snowflake.

When we first moved to the house, back in 2004, they were densely planted beneath the pear tree. I needed to move them and decided to place two clumps in containers which is where they have remained



Geoff inspects the damaged agaves

to this day, flourishing every winter to produce masses of flower heads. It is much larger than its relation, the snowdrop. It's easy to grow and multiplies freely in most gardens, provided the soil is moist enough.

It's been known to withstand flooding and standing water, so it's an ideal choice for bog gardens and pond-side plantings.

Mine are lovely snowflakes, bearing dark green leaves and wide white flowers with green markings. Grow Leucojum in moist soil, in sun to partial shade.

Allow to self-seed naturally and let the foliage die down full after flowering.

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



Bee bath