

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Signs of spring fill the garden with joy

CAN you believe it? We're just a week away from the clocks going forward, thus creating more time for us to be in the garden later in the day.

This year, 20th March was the date of the spring equinox, which is determined by the Earth's tilt as it travels around the Sun. In the northern hemisphere, the spring equinox varies between 19th to 21st March each year. So, we're officially in spring. Let's hope the weather plays ball and realises that too.

At least the gorgeous wild plum tree in my garden realises it is spring, as it is full of pretty blossoms at the moment. The wild plum (*Prunus domestica*) is a small, hardy, deciduous tree, commonly found in hedgerows and woodland borders.

It thrives in sun or partial shade, producing white to pale pink spring blossoms and small, edible, sweet red-to-yellow fruits in late summer.

It is very easy to grow and is ideal for wildlife and foraging.

Mine was a boxed Christmas gift from my mum about three years ago.

It's grown into a small tree with dark brown, often spiny twigs and oval, serrated leaves. Last summer, it produced its first fruit, small, smooth and round, ranging in colour from yellow to deep red or purple. The tree is hardy and prefers well-drained soil but can tolerate various conditions. You can prune it in June to manage growth and encourage fruiting. Its flowers attract bees in early spring, while fruits provide food for birds too.

With the excessive rain we have received to date this year, the garden is looking extremely lush. The central area, pictured, beneath the tall *Butia Capita* palm has a wonderful range of pretty greens on show. Beneath it, the *Chamaerops Humilis* looks great too. Both have had a spring trim to take off the wind and salt-blown outer fronds in order to tidy them up. Behind me, you can also see the hardy *aloe striatula*, which has come



Geoff and his jungle garden. Image: Geoff Stonebanks

through the harsh winter unscathed, and the freshly power-cleaned blue marine rope too.

Also planted beneath the palms is a large clump of sea kale or *Crambe maritima*. On top of being both a robust and lovely plant for the garden, sea kale is also edible. Glaucous mounds of this herbaceous perennial can often be spotted growing on shingle beaches. We have masses growing in Tide Mills, an area between us and the sea, here in Bishopstone. In early summer, clusters of white, honey-scented flowers appear that attract a range of pollinating insects. The very young leaves and stems can be eaten raw or steamed, but the best flavour is thought to come from plants that have been forced, as you would with rhubarb. It is

also a great addition to gravel and coastal gardens, where it'll combine beautifully with plants like sea thrift and *kniphofia*. You can see the clump I've had in the back garden now, for almost 20 years, just starting to have new growth emerging. For best results, grow *Crambe maritima* in full sun or partial shade in deep, fertile, well-drained soil and remember to cut it right back in the autumn.

Meanwhile, there is a lot going on in the greenhouse too. One of the many *echeveria* in there has just produced some really pretty flowers. *Echeveria* are popular, low-maintenance rosette-forming succulents native to semi-desert areas of Central/South America. They require 4-8 hours of bright, direct sun, well-draining succulent-mix

soil and infrequent watering (only when completely dry) to prevent root rot. They thrive in warm conditions, are easily propagated via offsets and are ideal for containers. You can see the delicate, five-point, star-shaped flowers with an orange centre, pictured. They look so pretty.

Don't forget, if you are already thinking about summer visits with friends and family, or just simply things to do for yourself, Driftwood will open its garden gate again for visitors, by arrangement only, from 1st June through until 2nd August this summer. You can email visit-driftwood@gmail.com to make a booking for individuals, up to groups of 25 to enjoy the garden and see in reality what you may have been reading about

over the winter months. Not to be missed too are my delicious homemade teas served on vintage china in the garden.

This year, the cake choices will be lemon Victoria sponge, coffee and walnut cake, or, if you are gluten-free, pineapple polenta cake.

In addition to the tea and cakes, you can enjoy perusing the work of six local artists, which will be beautifully displayed for sale throughout the garden and in the temporary greenhouse, which will double as a little shop. The bookings diary is already open, with quite a few groups already booked in.

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



Lush greenery



Flowering echeveria



New shoots sea kale



Wild plum