# GEOFF STONEBANKS
## The Driftwood Garden Diary



# Mild autumn keeps plants in full bloom

WITH the unusually mild weather we had through October and early November, the geraniums in my garden are still pushing out pretty flowers.

I don't remember them looking this good so late in the year before. I have both trailing and upright and they are all doing well. I'll leave them all where they are through the winter and they have two choices, sink or swim. In previous winters I have found that several have made it through and done well the following spring, so, fingers crossed. It will all depend on how harsh the upcoming winter turns out to be.

This year, I have decided to leave some of the smaller agave, those tightly packed into small containers which are unlikely to retain water, out to display on the railway sleeper wall which you can see behind me. It is the combination of water and frost that destroys the roots, by keeping the roots dry will help them get through! Agave plants are succulents that belong to the Asparagaceae family. They are native to Mexico and the southwestern regions of the United States but are now grown worldwide due to their unique and striking appearance. They are perennial, which means they live for several years. Some common names include century plant, maguey, and sisal. In Mexican culture, agaves are considered a symbol of purity, strength, and health. Some varieties were used by the Aztecs to create a fermented drink called pulque, which was a precursor to tequila, which is now made from the blue agave plant.

I've had a wild plum tree in the garden for several years now, bought for me as a Christmas gift by my Mum, several years ago. Back in September I wrote about the great crop of fruit it had produced. It's been in a large container for several years now, but I decided it had to go in the ground as with the incessant heat this past summer it had been drying out very quickly. Sadly, I was not able to get it out of the container myself and was unable to dig the hole, due to my wrist problems. Thankfully, I had some jobs lined up for someone to come in and do for me, so, I added this to the list! It is now happily planted up, so here's hoping for another good crop in 2027.



Geoff and a few agave left outside. Images: Geoff Stonebanks

One of the jobs that the guys completed while they were here was to trim the tops of the taller boundary hedges again. It is only a matter of ten weeks since they were last cut. The mild weather has caused havoc with the speed of growth, resulting in an extra trim this year. A few years ago, I would have tackled the job myself but one of the disadvantages of growing old is, I'm not sure I feel too safe climbing ladders and it gets to my wrists using secateurs.

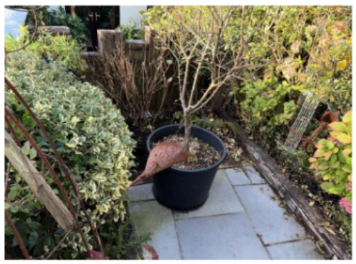
A plant that truly comes into its own in the garden at this time of the year is the stalwart dogwood. This vigorous, upright shrub is best known for its vivid coral-red stems, which bring strong winter colour after the leaves have dropped. In late spring to early summer, it produces flat clusters of creamy-white flowers, followed by occasional white berries. The dark green foliage takes on reddish-purple tones in autumn, adding seasonal interest before revealing the colourful stems. It performs best in full sun or light shade and should be cut back hard in early spring to maintain its stem colour intensity. Mine is planted behind the corten steel pond and can be clearly seen from the kitchen through the winter months and is a real eye catcher.

A firm favourite with visitors to the beach garden, is the pretty, prostate verbena, called Polaris. It is a compact perennial forming dense clumps of rigid leaves. Tiny pale-lilac flowers are held in clusters on wiry, square stems from summer through to the first frosts. Mine is continuing to flower and looks great set against the gravel. It is most suitable for planting in sunny, but also partially shaded locations. Mine face due south and have done really well there for the last 15 years! They are also suitable for growing in pots and containers. The plants attract butterflies and birds alike and have a fragrant flower too. Throughout the summer months it creates a pretty carpet of lilac flowers across the gravel. It always surprises me how few visitors are familiar with it, that said, I did stumble across it myself back in 2014 purely by chance. It never ceases to draw attention and is probably one of the several plants throughout the garden that is regularly mentioned by visitors wanting to learn its name.

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



Trailing geraniums hanging on



Wild plum transferred into the ground



Hedge trimming



Dogwood