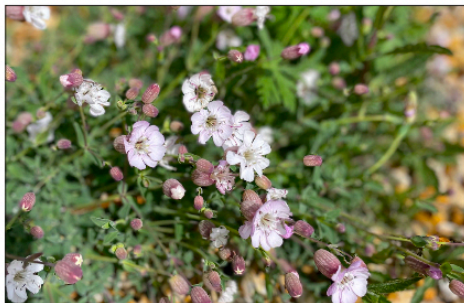


The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Cox's orange pippin blossom



Sea campion



Queen of the Night tulip

Landmark weekend for me and for the unfurling fern fronds

WELL, it's a bit of a landmark weekend for me. Yesterday, the 21st, was my 70th birthday, how on earth did that happen, I ask myself. What's more, this very day, April 22, back in 2017, my very first gardening column appeared in the paper. Gosh that's six years ago. Those years have flown by pretty quickly too. In that time, I've written 141,200 words and supplied over 200 images (since July 2022 when the column became a full page). That's a lot of gardening knowledge. Here's to the next six years.

This week, one of the gardens on offer from the National Garden Scheme is right here in the city. The Garden House at 5 Warleigh Road will open its gate today, April 22, from 1.30pm to 4.30pm, with entry £6. It is one of Brighton's secret gardens, always changing, with a touch of magic to delight visitors. Above all, it's slice of the country in the heart of the bustling city. There will be plants for sale too.

A little further afield, in Fletching Street, Mayfield, is The Oast, open from 11am to 5pm both days over the weekend with entry £5. It is a south-facing, gently sloping plot with a lovely view and a half-acre wild flower meadow. Full details on both these gardens and many more at www.ngs.org.uk.

Looking good in my garden at the moment are many beautiful tulips, like the stunning Queen of the Night. It is a distinctive tulip, bearing deep maroon, almost black flowers, making it quite the darkest of any tulip. It's well suited for growing among light-coloured tulips in the border or container, and makes a striking cut flower. Mine look good set against the grey background too.

In the centre of the back garden, I have three quite large phormium tenax. These plants are robust, exotic-looking, evergreen perennials, making a medium-sized clump of dark grey-green, strap-shaped leaves. In summer they produce tubular, dull red flowers about 4cm in length, in a panicle up to

4m in height. While best grown in sunny borders and gravel gardens, they make great focal points in containers. Mine are all in gravel and are now quite tall, having been originally planted back in 2008.

Though sometimes offered for sale as shrubs, phormiums are actually evergreen perennials from New Zealand and were grown as a source of fibre for traditional Maori textiles and rope making.

As spring continues its procession, ferns awaken to the sun and warming earth by unfurling their leaves, called fronds, that emerge from the base of the plant as tightly wound fiddleheads.

Ferns come in a wide range of colours and shapes. I have quite a number across the garden, many brought with me from my garden in London back in 2004. They are an ancient type of plant, dating back more than 360 million years. They don't produce flowers or seeds but spores instead. I love them, especially now as they begin to unfurl.

They provide form and texture and are easy to grow and make ideal foliage plants for a shady spot. Their unfurling new growth can be delicate and feathery or large and lush, ensuring there are ferns to suit every style and size of garden.

A plant I've had growing in the gravel, at both front and back of the house, is sea campion, which forms a relatively low mat of grey-green foliage. In summer, it is crowned with slender stems bearing single white flowers.

It can be found colonising coastal regions and this perennial looks great in gravel gardens, rockeries, dry stone walls or spilling over the edges of a pot. I have most of mine growing through the gravel but additionally, a very large grey pot, by the bench at the front of the house with it tumbling down over the edge.

In my garden I have three fruit trees, a Cox's orange pippin, and a pear tree and apple tree that were original to the garden



Geoff and phormium

when we moved in 19 years ago. At this time of year, they look radiant as the blossom appears. These early flowering trees are particularly important for bees who have been hibernating over the winter, and emerge in early spring. They need flower nectar to give them enough energy to look for a suitable nest site to lay their eggs. Early flowering fruit trees, along with other early flowering shrubs and flowers are just the ticket. In my garden, it is usually the case that the blossom appears, quickly followed by strong winds, which blows the delicate flowers away, covering the garden with what looks like confetti. Let's hope this year the blossom remains and we get a good crop of fruit in the autumn.

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



Fern fronds unfurling