

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



White heather



Geoff and Butia



Red sea monster flowers

Tender comfortable succulents and some fabulous blue skies

WE'VE had some pretty grim and very cold weather in recent weeks but my greenhouse has been keeping my tender succulents comfortable and warm, if a little cramped. Two plants doing well inside are the Brazilian Fuchsia and the Echeveria Red Sea Monster.

The former better known nowadays as *Justicia floribunda* is a bushy evergreen shrub with small, ovate, dark green leaves and small nodding clusters of tubular, yellow and scarlet flowers, 2cm in length, over a long period from late autumn to early spring. An exquisite winter flowering shrub! This unusual tender shrub will brighten up the winter months with its tropical, two-tone, tubular flowers. The dangling blooms are borne in profusion. The plant requires a frost-free position all year round but makes a neat and compact container plant - perfect for a warm conservatory or heated greenhouse! In very mild, frost-free locations it may be grown outdoors in a sheltered sunny border.

The latter is a real gem. This Echeveria is true to its name as it really wants to grow big! The leaves are thick dark green and frilled at the edge and turn bright red with good light. The flower stems are tall (up to 50-60cm) and crowned with red/dark pink flowers on the ends. A real favourite of mine and much commented on by visitors in the summer months. This is a centre piece all of its own. Echeverias are succulent, rosette-forming evergreen plants. They're native to Mexico and central and southern America, making them ideal for a hot, sunny spot. These plants thrive on neglect and cope well in drought. They're ideal for containers both inside and out and the smaller varieties are often used as part of carpet bedding schemes.

Despite the colder weather, the garden looks great, especially the beach garden with a sprinkling of frost on it and even more so with some of the gorgeous sunrise settings we have seen, like the image pictured above taken in my

beach garden recently. The fluorescent marine buoy adds to the pop of colour too.

We have actually seen many fabulous blue skies of late too, despite the cold weather. The palms in the back garden always stand out much better with a bright blue background as you can see. The really tall palm behind me is a stunning butia capita, now over 20 feet tall. It was planted back in the Autumn of 2009 and has grown really well. Whilst its fronds do get burnt by the strong winds, it has stood up well to what the elements have thrown at it.

Flourishing well at the side of the house is a pretty clump of white heather. Winter heathers are completely unfazed by winter. Snow, ice and cutting winds leave their dainty bells shining in the weak sunshine and, unlike other heathers, they're happy with a little lime in the soil. With wiry stems clothed in evergreen needles, usually deep green but sometimes in other shades, winter heather are usually derived from *Erica carnea*, which grows wild in the Alps and other cool mountainous regions.

They often stretch sideways to make a good, weed-suppressing ground cover. Winter heathers thrive in sun and, although they tolerate a little shade, it can make their stems stretch too much, rendering them untidy. Some varieties start to flower as early as November, while others come into bloom as late as April, with January to March usually their peak. Few reach more than 25cm in height, but some make notable specimens.

If you have not yet had a chance to visit the National Garden Scheme's snowdrop garden at Pembury House this month there may still be time. You'll have to check online to see if there are still tickets available. Pembury House is in Clayton, near Ditchling and is open for pre-booked visitors only on the 27th and 28th next week and then final openings this year on the 6th and 7th March Log on to www.ngs.org.uk to see if you can still buy a ticket. Depending on the vagaries of the season, hellebores and



Morning sunrise in beach garden

snowdrops are at their best in February and March. This is a country garden, tidy but not manicured with new work always going on. Discover winding paths giving a choice of walks through its 3 acres of garden, which is in and enjoys views of the South Downs National Park. It is advisable to wear suitable footwear and take along mags and winter woollies to stay dry and warm.

People always say that February feels like a turning point in the garden. It's still cold outside, but there are signs of spring's imminent arrival everywhere you look. Bulbs are slowly emerging from the ground, and the days are getting longer at last. That's the theory at least!

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



Justicia Floribundi