

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



An autumnal garden staple

This year, my summer house has been in the garden for almost 20 years. It takes the full brunt of the wet weather and over time the window frames and the bases of the two main doors have become quite badly damaged. I had considered replacing it but it was bought with money my father gave to me, just before he passed away, so I was keen to give it another lease of life!

I was lucky to find a good carpenter in the town who has done a fabulous job. He removed both the doors and rebuilt the bottom sections, as you can see in the image. This, coupled with a brand-new sill and replacing two opening windows that had swollen and become difficult to use with two fixed pane windows has really made a real difference and should see it through another 20 years!

While here, he also built a new gate to the left of the summer house that had badly rotted too! All now looking good ready for 2026 visitors.

There is some pretty amazing colour in the garden this week too. The mahonia x media Winter Sun, pictured, has beautiful yellow flowers on it.

Mahonias are grown for their attractive foliage and fragrant, showy winter flowers. They provide an invaluable source of pollen and nectar for winter colonies of bumblebees and other pollinators too. It looks particularly good at the back of borders. Slender spikes of bright yellow flowers appear from November to March, above rosettes of large, handsome, dark green, holly-like leaves. The flowers of this lovely, upright, evergreen shrub have a fragrance reminiscent of lily-of-the-valley, and seem to glow in the wintry sunlight. They are followed by bunches of highly ornamental, round, deep purple berries. It makes a lovely focal point for a shady spot in the garden, where its glossy, architectural leaves can be appreciated all year round.

A real staple of the autumnal garden is the ever-popular chrysanthemum. Garden chrysanthemums, which are sold as house plants.



Chrysanthemums

mums flower from late summer to autumn, when little else is in bloom. Their flowers come in a range of different colours, sizes and shapes, and can be single or double-flowered and make excellent cut flowers that can last for up to three weeks in a vase, and they work well in dried arrangements, too. For a reliably perennial chrysanthemum, choose a hardy variety, which will survive winter outside so you can leave it in the ground and it will come back the following year. The pretty red ones, pictured, have been there for several years now and reliable come back each year!

Garden chrysanthemums are not the same plants as indoor chrysanthemums, which are sold as house plants.

Another lovely splash of colour in the back garden at the moment are the delicate flowers on the salvia hot lips. Perennial sages are worth their weight in gold in ornamental borders, thanks to their summer-long displays of spiky, nectar-rich flowers.

Hot Lips bear large, open-mouthed, bi-coloured white and red blooms throughout the summer, on compact, scented, bushy plants. In very hot weather some blooms may be fully red or white, and white blooms tend to be more common as day length decreases in late summer. 'Hot Lips' are perfect for planting near a bench or path, where you can enjoy the pretty blooms and fragrant foliage. The flowers are extremely attractive to bees and other pol-

linators. You can prune the plant from late-winter to early spring, ideally before new growth emerges. Remove any dead or damaged stems at their base, taking care to make clean cuts just above a bud or leaf node. If you prune back the outer stems by about one-third of their length you will encourage branching and denser growth. This will keep your shrub bushy and compact.

At this time of the year, I can always rely on the beach garden and the area around the large rowing boat at the front of the house to look good. That said, I am being forced to make some changes to this part of the garden in the coming weeks, due to having new neighbours, who have really cut back their shrubs along

the pathway in their garden adjacent to my boundary. Needless to say, they needed to do it, as the previous owners had really neglected the area but it has now left big gaps through my boundary hedge to their garden. I have a plan, more details in the coming weeks.

If any readers are interested, my final garden talk of 2025 will be my brand-new presentation, Succulent Obsession, to Patcham Gardening Network at 7pm on Wednesday the 26th November in Patcham Community Centre, Ladies Mile Road, Brighton BN1 8TA. They welcome visitors for £5 each if you fancy coming along!

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



Mahonia x media Winter Sun



Geoff and beach garden



Summer house refurb



Salvia hot lips