

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



The Brazilian fuchsia



Coronilla



Hellebore

It's not too late to add a splash of festive colour with a plant

WITH just two days to go until the big day, I guess there are not too many of us working in the garden. This is the first year, for some time, that I have not bought a real tree. That said, I do have the two potted ones outside in the garden that I've had for a couple of years. They have both been positioned close to the house, on the patio adjacent to my newly decorated garden room so when the lights are on we can appreciate them from the house.

It's probably getting a bit late to go mad with excessive Christmas decorations, like me, but definitely not too late to allow some very special plants to create that festive spirit in your living space at the very last minute.

In my experience, some plants are always associated with certain times or events throughout the year. I splashed out on a large poinsettia the other day.

These pretty plants are essential for me at this time of the year and are widely grown indoors over Christmas for their brightly coloured flowers.

They are often disposed of once they start to fade, but with a little care, you can keep them all year and they will colour up again the following year.

I've probably had a 50 per cent success rate in years gone by, actually managing to keep one that flowered each year over five successive Christmases.

They need bright, but filtered light, away from strong sun and draughts with a minimum temperature of about 14 degrees. Make sure when you buy the plant that it has not been stored in draughty conditions and protect it when you take it home.

Cold outdoor temperatures can damage the foliage. It's best to put it in a plastic bag so that it is completely protected.

Several times, I have experienced them starting to wilt as soon as I get them home and then continue to deteriorate, no matter what I do. This is usually due to it having been stored in cold conditions in the shop before being bought. Unfortunately, there is little you can do about this.

Make sure you water poinsettias

sparingly, as overwatering can damage plants. As a rule of thumb, only water when the surface of the compost has begun to dry out. The flowering life of plants is extended by humidity, so mist plants regularly. Good luck with yours.

We've had a lot of exceptionally cold weather and I have enjoyed the garden from the office window.

One plant that is a real stunner outside at the moment is the hellebore *argutifolius*.

It produces bowl-shaped, pale green flowers that hang above leathery, prickly-edged, sea-green leaves from January to March. That said mine is in full flower now. This popular evergreen, also known as the Corsican hellebore, makes an architectural statement in the middle of a mixed or shrub border, or in my case, planted in the gravel beach garden.

Its handsome foliage is a long-lasting source of interest, even after the flowers have passed. It is fully hardy and mine is in a fairly exposed location but still does well. This perennial is semi-evergreen, so it can lose some of its leaves in winter.

In colder regions or more exposed gardens, it may lose them all, but then fresh new growth always appears again in spring. It will grow well in full sun to part shade too.

Another favourite at this time of year is the coronilla *glauca*, a dense evergreen shrub with bright green leaves and umbels of fragrant, pale yellow flowers in late winter and again in late summer.

Mine can be relied upon to flower regularly and provide a wonderful splash of colour in the darkest of winters. I have three plants in the beach garden at the front of the house which are flowering well at the moment.

Also pictured is the stunning Brazilian fuchsia, or *justicia floribunda*. It 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. Mine is currently in the greenhouse and has just started to flower.

This is the smaller of my two plants, both giving a great show,



Geoff and his potted Christmas trees

shame it is only me, on my visits to the greenhouse, who can appreciate the beautiful flowers. Some years I do move to the front porch but space was at a premium this year.

I sincerely hope all my readers have a wonderful Christmas and fingers crossed, some of your gifts will be garden related, or possibly even plants.

That said, hopefully you will be inspired to get out in your plot in the new year.

I'm sure many of us will be outside, enjoying the garden, despite the inevitable cold. Fingers crossed, look out for me on Sky News Breakfast on Christmas Day at about 9am.

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



The poinsettia