

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Spirea magic carpet



Pulsatilla



Sea kale

It's officially spring... time for some serious pressure-washing

EARLIER this week we officially entered spring and next weekend sees the clocks go forward, the perfect combination for any self-respecting gardener and the best time to see crocuses in flower.

I have a few at Driftwood, all planted in containers or raised beds. These delicate little flowers appear mainly in late winter to early spring and are good in borders or seasonal containers while others are best in a rock garden or an alpine house. Robust types provide drifts of colour in lawns and underneath deciduous trees.

They are grown from bulb-like structures called corms and are low-growing perennial plants from the iris family. These early bloomers can often be seen peeking up through the snow well before any other flowers appear on the landscape. Well, mine have not seen any snow this year but still look striking, while very dainty. They can grow in a range of conditions, including woodlands, coastal gardens, and suburban lawns. If you don't have any, plant this perennial flower in the autumn for an early spring delight. They naturalise, meaning that they spread and come back year after year. Plant bulbs in groups or clusters rather than spacing them in a single line along a walkway or border. Single flowers get lost in the landscape. Plant a few inches apart, and plant in groups of ten or more.

Just beginning to flourish in the beach garden is sea kale. *Crambe maritima*, its proper name, is a species of halophytic flowering plant in the genus *Crambe* of the family Brassicaceae. It grows wild along the coasts of mainland Europe and the British Isles. It is a striking plant that is both ornamental and edible. The large leaves are a lovely glaucous green, with wavy edges, and in summer these are crowned with a cloud of tiny white perfumed flowers. These nectar-rich flowers are great for attracting pollinating insects. In gardens, it looks good planted in dry sunny beds or into gravel like mine.

A pretty, delicate little flower growing in my garden this week is pulsatilla, an herbaceous perennial that forms clumps of finely dissected leaves, with hairy bell-shaped or cup-shaped flowers followed by silky-plumed seed-heads. Bursting into bloom are the three small shrubs of *Spirea Magic Carpet* too. This is a low-growing deciduous shrub with ovate leaves opening red, and changing to yellow, always with some red young growth; flat clusters of deep pink flowers in summer. It is very easy to grow in most moist soils, tolerant of all but the most extreme conditions in full sun or light shade. Especially suitable for mixed borders, my three shrubs have been in the garden for many years now.

This weekend there are two gardens open for the National Garden Scheme in Sussex, Down Place right over on the west of the patch in South Harting, which opens from 1.30pm to 5.30pm on both Saturday and Sunday. It's set on the South Downs, with panoramic views out to the undulating countryside. The garden merges seamlessly into its surrounding landscape with rose and herbaceous borders that have been moulded into the sloping ground. On the other side of the county, there is King Johns Lodge in Etchingham, open today, Saturday, from 10am through until 5pm. This is a four-acre romantic garden for all seasons. From the eclectic shop, nursery and tearoom, stroll past the wildlife pond, through an orchard with bulbs, a meadow, rose walk and much more. Full details on both the gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk.

I've just finished pressure-cleaning all the hard surfaces throughout my garden. I have to say it is a task I never relish and it can be hard on your back. That said, once complete it transforms the look of the plot and is well worth the effort. The Indian sandstone, in particular, comes up really well and looks so much better. I have quite a lot of marine rope in the garden, it used to tie the ferry up in



Geoff with the repositioned fences

Newhaven in a former life. Throughout the year the white and blue rope becomes much darker with dirt ingrained in the strands. A quick dose of the pressure cleaner brings it all back to life, dazzling white and blue.

Coupled with the cleaning, I have rearranged the area at the top of the garden, where a sea buckthorn hedge had to be removed last autumn, as it had died. The two blue metal fence sections have been repositioned by the wall and the blue, wobbly, metal fencing has been given a more prominent position, with one half used to separate the patio from the gravel bed and the other, as a form of sculpture, under the olive tree.

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



The power-cleaned marine rope