

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



Inspiration in creative planting

You can see I've added a real splash of colour at the top of the garden.

I have two vintage mesh fish traps that I hang from the tree, but on their own they tend to get a bit lost in the scheme of things. My partner had the idea of buying some multi-coloured ping pong balls to drop inside to liven them up. You can see it works very well and makes them a focal point now.

Here are just two of the several gardens open for the National Garden Scheme across the county this weekend. Over near Lewes, there is Banks Farm in Boast Lane, Barcombe, which opens both days from 10.30am to 4pm with entry £5. This is a nine-acre garden set in rural countryside where extensive lawns and shrub beds merge with the more naturalistic woodland garden set around the lake. An orchard, vegetable garden, ponds and a wide variety of plant species add to an interesting and very tranquil garden.

In Tottingworth Park in Broad Oak, near Heathfield, there is Kotamaki, open Saturday between 10am and midday with entry £12 inclusive of refreshments, but pre-booking is essential, so go online and check ticket availability. The owners will provide a talk about the garden at 10.30am. This is a large, creatively planted garden featuring a long double border enclosed by yew hedging, along with a rockery, shade garden, exotic garden, pot garden, wildflower meadows and a kitchen garden. There is an emphasis on continuity of interest through imaginative mixed plantings of shrubs, climbers, perennials, bulbs, annuals and self-sowers. The garden also includes a varied collection of wisterias, trained as shrubs, on trellis work and on a pergola.

Full details on both gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk. You can also hear me on BBC Sussex's Sunday gardening programme talking about all the gardens opening for the scheme next week.

I've recently finished putting the more delicate agave back out



Geoff Stonebanks and a splash of colour. Pictures: Geoff Stonebanks

in the garden from their winter home inside the shed. I bought a single plant from a market in Chichester way back in 2012 and have now got 20 of them in varying sizes, all from that one plant. They are quite striking but have very sharp spines, so beware. All are in containers and they are carefully distributed around the beach garden for the summer months.

The medium-sized pear tree in the garden has produced lots of blossom again so we can probably expect a good crop of pears in the autumn. The tree was original to the garden when we moved in but I believe it is a conference pear tree, which are popular for their good crop of delicious desert pears with a sweet rosewater

flavour. Their long, slender pears have green russet skin encasing firm and juicy cream-coloured flesh. They are ready in late September and the pears can be stored for up to two months once picked. I tend to peel and poach mine then freeze and use for pies and crumbles through the winter.

A regular favourite in my garden is the pretty honey spurge, or to give it its proper name, *Euphorbia mellifera*. This handsome, semi-evergreen shrub is native to Madeira and the Canary Islands and has become a popular garden plant for its honey-scented summer flowers, which are popular with bees, attractive domed growth habit and waxy leaves. In full sun,

it will develop a denser, more compact shape and in shadier spots, a looser and taller habit. It looks brilliant growing in exotic borders or gravel gardens like mine. For best results though, grow the plant in full sun. Poorly drained soils should be avoided which makes it a great asset in my chalk plot. It can be pruned back hard in spring if it starts to get too leggy, but remember to wear gloves when pruning, as the milky white sap can irritate the skin and eyes.

I wrote last autumn about a new purchase for the garden while we were away in Derbyshire, a Japanese Deshojo maple bonsai tree. It sat outside throughout the winter and has beautiful red leaves forming on it again, as you can

see. The tree is a classic choice for bonsai, due to its small foliage and intense colour, often requiring regular pruning to maintain its size. It is also famous for its brilliant scarlet/crimson leaves, often considered among the best red-foilage maples.

Next week is National Gardening Week, April 27 through until May 3, when the RHS invites everyone to embrace curiosity in their gardens by slowing down, looking closer and discovering the small wonders that bring outdoor spaces to life. Check out their website for more details: www.rhs.org.uk.

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



Euphorbia mellifera flowering



Pear blossom



Agave parviflora



Japanese maple bonsai