

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Heather



Hellebore frozen



Top corner of garden

Cold spell has taken its toll but some plants have still thrived

FOR me, the only downside of having gravel gardens is the need at this time of year to try and clear the leaf debris from amongst the pebbles.

I have to confess it's not really a job I enjoy but needs must in order to get the garden looking the best it can for visitors this summer. This week, it has been the turn of the area right at the top of the garden, beneath the large yucca and spreading olive tree. This area is especially bad at the moment as I've recently had the ivy hedge trimmed and the top of the olive tree cut out. The net effect is lots of trimmings falling down on to the stones. The yucca in the corner came from my garden in north London when we moved back in 2004. It was a single stem then and has now developed into a large tree with several stems that produce fabulous stems of white flowers, several times throughout the year.

There are a couple of gardens, one new for 2023, opening for the National Garden Scheme this weekend. Today, Saturday, from 2pm to 5pm, Buddington Farm in Buddington Lane, Easebourne, near Midhurst, will open for the first time, with entrance £5. They are a working farm with wonderful daffodils and snowdrops by the farmhouse planted by the owners' late mother-in-law, who was a very keen gardener.

Tomorrow, February 26, Denmans Garden in Denmans Lane, Fontwell, opens its garden gate between 11am and 4pm with entrance £9. Tickets here must be pre-booked online prior to the visit. The garden was created by Joyce Robinson, a brilliant pioneer in gravel gardening, and was the former home of influential landscape designer John Brookes MBE. Denmans is a Grade II registered, post-war garden renowned for its curvilinear layout and complex plantings. See unusual plants, structure and fragrance in the gravel gardens, faux riverbeds, intimate walled garden, ponds and conservatory.

The gravel gardens at Denmans were started in 1970 and inspired

by the Greek landscape and the dry riverbeds of the South Downs. Mrs Robinson created two faux riverbeds on a slope formerly occupied by Guernsey calves. They terminate in a pond built by John Brookes. He believed Mrs Robinson's spontaneous plant combinations, which included grasses, herbs, shrubs and perennials, pointed the way of future gardening and set about fusing her novel planting style with his own characteristically bold design flair, focusing on structure, texture, pattern and colour.

The garden, which has benches throughout for contemplation, has a strong year-round interest and has been undergoing restoration since January 2018. Visitors will find inspiration and design ideas for gardeners of all skill levels and garden sizes. Staff are always happy to answer questions. Full details and tickets available at www.ngs.org.uk

Back in my own garden, the recent cold spells have taken their toll on some plants but two in particular, both in my beach garden, have really shone, even more so with a touch of frost upon the leaves and flowers. The two large clumps of hellebore *argutifolius* have produced many large flowers again this year and they really stand out, edged with frost, as you can see.

The other large shrub that is a perfect foil for the freezing cold weather, in my plot at any rate, is the *coronilla glauca*. It is a small, bushy evergreen shrub with blue-grey, pinnate leaves and heads of fragrant rich yellow flowers that seem to never end. They prefer full sun and a sheltered spot. That said, you'd hardly call my beach garden sheltered, yet they have thrived there now for many years and look very pretty edged with frost.

Down the side of the house, I have a pretty white heather, which has been growing there for several years now. Heathers are the low maintenance workhorses of the garden. Given the right care and location, these plants will reward you with years of attractive foliage, bright bell-shaped flowers and very little maintenance work



Geoff and hellebore

to keep them looking good. Flowers are commonly available in white, pink, dark pink and nearly red. They require moist but well-drained soils and do not like to sit in standing water as they are very shallow rooted. As such, they are also very susceptible to drying out in the warm summer season, so water them frequently when it is hot. If required, they should be trimmed after flowering, as they re-flower on new shoots each year.

For those who like to listen to the gardening programme on the radio on Sunday mornings, I'll be joining Joe Talbot, live, on BBC Radio Sussex tomorrow on Dig It, at about 11.40am, to talk about some of the gardens opening for the National Garden Scheme next month, so do listen in.

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



Coronilla glauca