

GEOFF STONEBANKS

The Driftwood Garden Diary



From olive trees to Peruvian lilies

THE National Garden Scheme's open-garden season is fast coming to a close for 2026.

On the 27th will be my final broadcast this year on BBC Radio Sussex's Sunday Gardening programme with Pat Marsh, when I will be outlining all the gardens opening for the scheme for the remainder of the year, across both Sussex and Surrey. There will, hopefully, be a catch up on the Sunday before Christmas, with information on some of the early openers, in their centennial year of 2027. Fingers crossed I will have the opportunity to tell listeners each week of the season next year too. I can't quite believe it will be my 17th year of radio broadcasts on BBC Sussex, how time flies.

Looking great in my garden are the large flower heads on the several palms. You can see me pictured with a large cordyline. These are a bold and handsome evergreen shrub that slowly develops a tree-like form. It has a dramatic and exotic appearance with an attractive architectural shape, forming either a single trunk or multiple stems topped with dense tufts of long, narrow, leathery leaves. It is sometimes known as the cabbage palm or Torbay palm, although it isn't actually a palm tree or anything to do with cabbage.

The most widely grown species is cordyline australis which is native to New Zealand. It has plain green leaves. Green-leaved forms are largest and fastest-growing and can reach around 5 metres high. While foliage is the main appeal of cordylines, mature plants can also produce large clusters of tiny creamy-white flowers in summer as you can see.

Also looking good in the beach garden are the five large fascicularia bicolor. They are gorgeous perennials that are ideal for incorporating into patio pots, in a conservatory and low maintenance gardening schemes. Easy to care for and loving direct sunlight, it has textural silver-green leaflets that develop into a rosette forming mound. The plant is a great addition to rockeries and shel-



Flower heads on palms. Image: Geoff Stonebanks

tered borders. Once you have seen the plant in full flower, it is quite impossible to forget! This extraordinary bromeliad is a Chilean native with linear silver-green foliage that forms a spreading, evergreen rosette. The leaves are tough with a sharp, serrated edge. They are best placed in a sunny, well-drained and sheltered position where the soil will not get too wet. Mine are all planted in the south-facing gravel beach garden, at the front of the house.

I have several olive trees in the garden, a large one, over 20 feet tall, that was a 50th birthday gift over 23 years ago! Additionally I have two handsome trees in pots behind the house and a much smaller one in the gravel garden that has produced some small

fruits this year as you can see. Olive trees bring a timeless Mediterranean style to British gardens.

With their silvery-green leaves, gnarled trunks and soft evergreen foliage, they're perfect for adding year-round elegance and a touch of sunshine to patios, doorways and terraces. They thrive in full sun and well-drained soil, making them ideal for containers or sunny borders.

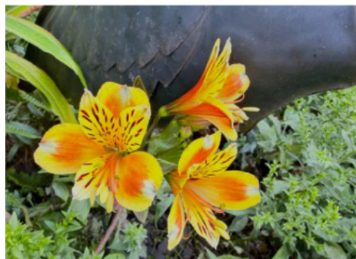
Once established, they require very little care, just occasional watering and light pruning to keep their naturally graceful shape. In summer, small creamy-white flowers may appear, followed by fruit in warm conditions. Olive trees symbolise peace, friendship and longevity, a beautiful choice for any outdoor space.

A true stalwart in the garden is the pretty alstroemeria Indian summer. Native to South America, it is a Peruvian lily which is just a little bit different. The vibrant blooms appear like flames above the dark green-bronze foliage from summer right through until the first frosts, so you won't be short of flowers in your garden. The trick to extending flowering time is not to deadhead, but remove tired blooms by pulling the stem, the resulting wound then initiates further flowers. It is ideal for planting in both borders and containers and the flowers make a long lasting and dramatic addition to your indoor floral arrangements too. With so many exotic-looking blooms produced you may be forgiven for think-

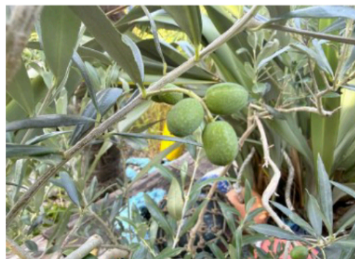
ing that this Alstroemeria is not hardy, but winter protection will only be required if temperatures dip below -10C. It is a tuberous perennial and prefers to be grown in well-drained soil in a partly shaded sheltered site where it will reach a height of 60-75cm, spreading 30-60cm.

A lovely gift to the garden recently, by a couple from the National Garden Scheme's head office team who came to visit, is a pretty heart-shaped hanging decoration. It is formed from small pebbles drilled and threaded and looks a perfect addition, suspended on a piece of the rusted metalwork in the back garden.

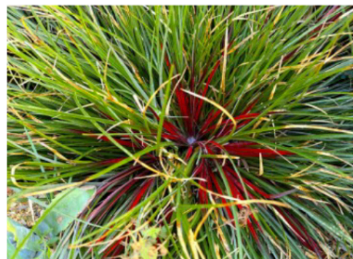
Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or follow him on social media.



Alstroemeria Indian Summer



A few olives on the tree



Fascicularia bicolor



A gift for the garden