

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Euonymus japonicus



The frozen birdbath



Frozen spring snowflake

Glossy, robust and reliable, this shrub is a harbinger of spring

I RECENTLY visited Sheffield Park and Garden on a very cold, frosty but sunny morning. It must have been ten years since I last visited. Chester the dog came along too and thoroughly enjoyed the wonderful walks around the garden and lakes. Highly recommended for a chilly winter's day. The vistas to be seen as you walk around are quite wonderful.

The Grade I listed garden is a horticultural work of art formed through centuries of landscape design, with influences of Capability Brown and Humphry Repton. Four lakes form the heart of the garden, with paths circulating through the glades and wooded areas surrounding them. Each owner has left their impression, which can still be seen today in the layout of the lakes, the construction of Pulham Falls, the planting of Palm Walk and the many different tree and shrub species from around the world. It is open daily from 10am to 4pm.

A shrub looking good in the garden this weekend is euonymus japonicus or evergreen spindle.

It is a glossy, robust and reliable plant to have in the garden. More importantly, as far as my plot is concerned, one of the best salt resistant shrubs for hedging and topiary by the sea, also very wind tolerant, which is why you so often see it as a hedge in seaside gardens. However, it has other uses.

It doesn't have to live by the sea, it will grow anywhere and it doesn't have to be a hedge. Blobs, topiary, shapely little tree, the possibilities are endless.

One of its most endearing habits is being one of the first harbingers of spring. The fresh green young growth often appears at the end of February after most winters by the seaside. Inland, there's always the risk that the new growth might get damaged by late frosts but no matter, it'll quickly re-grow. Clip it into anything you like but as a shapely little tree by the seaside it's outstanding. They will grow in any old soil, sun or shade but as with most plants, the leaves will be darker green in shade. The flowers are small and greenish in colour, fruits are pink and orange with a hint of white but seldom produced

according to the experts. That said, mine flower most years. The plant is very drought resistant too.

Next weekend, Saturday, February 3, the annual Seedy Saturday event takes place in Lewes Town Hall between 10am and 3pm. There will be stalls selling plants and garden implements, seed potatoes and shallots, seeds for wildflower meadows, reconditioned tools and hand-crafted bird boxes. The event is a showcase of Lewes's numerous and varied community growing projects, with music, locally made hot food, teas, cake and coffee and plenty of room to sit and chat to friends. Children can plant seeds and adults can make a willow plant support (pre-booking is essential by contacting tutor Christiane Gunzi at christianegunzi5@gmail.com) or take part in a tool care and sharpening demonstration.

This year's talks are from Hannah Fox of Marchants Hardy Plants, demonstrating and talking about the "propagation of perennials" and Lesley Healey and Helen Sida, talking on "wildlife friendly food growing". Both talks are free but booking is essential because places are limited. Entry on the day is adults £1 with children free. The organisers request you bring cash.

There has been a tremendous amount of really cold weather in recent weeks and lots of ice forming in the garden. That said, the formation on the corten steel birdbath, with the fallen leaves trapped beneath, does look quite picturesque.

Leucojum vernum, spring snowflake, is a bulbous perennial growing up to 30cm in height, with strap-shaped glossy dark green leaves and erect stems with one or two broadly bell-shaped, green-tipped white flowers, 2.5cm in width.

Each tepal is often tipped with green. They love moist ground with semi-shade preferred. It is similar to summer snowflake, but as the name suggests it flowers earlier, from February to April, and has scented flowers. I had a large clump growing under a pear tree when we moved in 20 years ago and transferred them to two large containers and they flower religiously each winter. The two



Geoff and Chester at Sheffield Park

delicate flowers pictured look even prettier once frozen, with a translucent appearance.

In my garden, bulbs are starting to appear and some wildlife are waking up as the light levels and hopefully temperatures start to increase.

It's time to prune shrubs and climbers as well as evergreen hedges. I've got many low trimmed hedges and divisions between my various garden rooms, so I have to trim them fairly regularly to keep them as I want. One job worth doing now if you have been growing winter pansies in your plot is to remove their faded flowers to stop them setting seed. This will encourage a flush of new flowers when the weather warms up.

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



Sheffield Park