

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



11 vanloads later and this lovely garden was on the move

THIS weekend, a truly beautiful garden opens for the National Garden Scheme in Saltdean. Chris Briggs and Steve Jenner moved there in December 2015, leaving behind a garden they had lovingly created from a blank slab of concrete in Brighton.

In recent years, they had been opening to support the Sussex Beacon, as part of the Garden Gadabout.

Fortunately, the new homeowners of the property were not gardeners and were quite happy for the guys to remove the entire garden to their new plot. Eleven vanloads of some quite large specimen plants in pots later and they were ready for the new project.

The garden at 33 Wivelsfield Road is a good deal bigger than the one they left behind. It was surrounded by large leylandii conifers and other trees, which unfortunately had been forced to grow in odd ways, due to the conifers. The first job was cutting them down and then the mammoth task of digging out the roots.

A digger arrived in June 2017 and about 40 tonnes of chalk were dug out from behind the then bungalow, to create a decent sized patio area.

Chris said: "We were amazed at the increase of usable space that was created."

Steve said: "The only downside was we had removed a substantial wind break, we subsequently found out how windy it is living up at the top of Saltdean."

To reduce the impact of disposing of so much chalk they had a retaining wall built halfway, to terrace the sloping garden and enable a volume of chalk to be lost there. Early July saw the start of planting, surprisingly they had not lost many, despite a very hot summer in 2016. The final design involved dismantling the greenhouse and moving it up the garden into a more sensible position where it takes less space. They also added a circular patio on the upper terrace which gets early morning sun.

Through 2018, they continued to develop the garden and collect more plants, especially succulents, to which they have become

addicted. Now owning their first greenhouse, they felt they had plenty of room to house them in winter, a fact which turned out to be untrue when they came to pack them away that autumn. They had to buy a pop-up greenhouse, which was a real challenge, as they nearly lost a large part of their collection one night during a storm.

In the summer of 2018, I went along to see how they were getting on and to encourage them to open for the Macmillan Garden Trail the following year. Despite their reservations, I am pleased to say they agreed to open the following year as "a work in progress".

As a result, spring 2019 saw them go into overdrive. Not being ones to do things by half measures, they were determined that, if they were opening their garden for paying visitors, it had to live up to their reputation of a colour-packed summer garden. Chris said; "In the final few days before the late July opening weekend, we were laying a small patio and planting bed, right up to the wire."

So favourable were the comments and impact on visitors that the National Garden Scheme invited them to open on their own in 2020 season and they have not looked back since.

The garden at 33 Wivelsfield Road, Saltdean, BN2 8FP, will be open on July 30 and 31 from 11am to 5pm. Admission will be £5 and children go free, dogs on leads allowed too. Enjoy delicious tea and cake seated in the garden too. Highly recommended.

While Chris and Steve have probably been curating their collection of succulents long before I began, I too have a pretty large collection at Driftwood, including a gorgeous aeonium Sunburst, given to me by the guys back in 2019. Many of mine are displayed in a new theatre of old railway sleepers which really aids their display as you can see.

A gorgeous new addition to both our collections this year has been a succulent, xsemponium Destiny. This plant was lucky enough to win the Plant of the Year award at the 2022 Chelsea Flower Show. The plant was submitted by Surreal Succulents in Cornwall. With unique, veiny leaves, the purple-



Pictured top is the garden in Wivelsfield Road owned by Chris Briggs and Steve Jenner, right. Top right the new xsemponium Destiny and, above, Geoff with aeonium Sunburst

hued plant beat 19 other species in this year's coveted competition. As well as having an eye-catching appearance, this plant can produce one very large flat head up to 60cm across and is the world's first cross between aeonium and sempervivum. We can see why it caught the attention of the judges. I love mine.

You can read more of my garden in Seaford at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or come and visit. It is open by arrangement, now extended to August 31, with money raised going to Macmillan Cancer Support, for who I have raised over £100,000 in recent years.

