

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Erigeron, a semi-evergreen perennial



Fatsia spider's web is low maintenance



Verbena poliaris flower, with bicolor behind

Garden sculptures come into their own in the colder months

HARD to believe but it's the 1st of December tomorrow! Where has the year gone? Before we know it will be the shortest day later in the month and the nights start drawing out again. It certainly started to turn a bit colder as we moved through November but some plants just don't mind the cold weather, like the stunning fatsia "spider's web" in the garden. The Japanese Aralia, to give it its proper name, is a low maintenance, striking evergreen shrub with a notably tropical feel, featuring iconic lobed leaves. It produces pleasing white flowers and black berries in autumn as you can see from the picture of one in my garden.

"Spider's web" is a rare cultivar which boasts gorgeous variegated leaves. The plant is native to southern Japan and southern Korea, where it grows in coastal woodlands. The name Fatsia comes from an approximation of the Japanese word for "eight", which makes reference to its iconic eight-lobed leaves. Spider's web is primarily grown for its handsome foliage, which looks as though it has been variously dusted with icing sugar, with some leaves having had a more generous dusting than others! It makes a wonderful specimen, particularly when planted near white-flowering plants that complement the leaf variegation. It can also be used to help add light and colour to areas of lightly dappled shade. You can prune them lightly in mid to late spring, trimming shoots that spoil the symmetry. The experts say, protect the plants from cold, drying winds either by moving to a sheltered spot if in a pot or cover with horticultural fleece, but mine have remained unprotected in the garden for several winters now.

A great favourite of mine in the garden is the pretty Erigeron karvinskianus. It is a semi-evergreen perennial with wiry branching stems bearing narrow, hairy grey-green leaves. Yellow-centred, daisy-type flower-heads open white but soon turn pinkish-purple, during the summer. It is an unsung hero of the garden, softening edges and filling gaps with its cloud-like blooms. Its

ability to thrive in various conditions and bloom for months on end makes it a true testament to the resilience and beauty of nature. Whether cascading over walls, softening pathway edges, or bringing life to urban nooks and crannies, this is a versatile and rewarding addition to the garden. Its long-lasting flowers, adaptability, and wildlife-friendly nature make it a great choice among perennials. It offers months of effortless beauty with minimal care. I have it growing everywhere in my garden, the clump pictured is at the front of the house. It thrives in both full sun and partial shade and is equally at home in well-drained soils and can even tolerate coastal conditions, making it a perfect choice for seaside gardens like mine.

Another reliable bloomer is the verbena Polaris which is a low-growing perennial that features fragrant clusters of pale lilac flowers, pictured towering above the Fascicularia bicolor in my beach garden. The plant blooms from early summer through until the first frosts. With its wiry, square stems and dense clumps of rigid, lance-shaped dark green leaves, this verbena adds a delicate yet resilient touch to garden borders. Ideal for full sun and well-drained soil, this easy-to-grow plant creates a striking front-of-border display that spreads gracefully and attracts pollinators, offering long-lasting seasonal colour.

Meanwhile, in the warmth of the greenhouse, my collection of mangave have made themselves at home for the colder months. Mangave plants are a unique and fascinating hybrid of Agave and Manfreda plants, known for their striking foliage, sculptural form and low maintenance. These plants are perfect for planting in a variety of locations, including rock gardens and in pots on patios or decks. They are well suited for modern, succulent, garden styles. When it comes to companion plants, they look great with other drought tolerant plants, cacti and succulents such as sedum, echeveria and agave. With their unique foliage and low maintenance needs, these plants



Fish and Boeing wing tip on display

are sure to be a standout feature in any garden. Pictured is Mangave "pineapple express", also in my collection are "lavender lady", "mission to mars", moon glow" and "praying hands". Don't you just love their names.

Great features in the garden through the winter months are the many sculptural pieces, like the gorgeous stainless-steel fish you can see behind me. It's a great piece I bought last year called Busy Life. It is actually a fish on a mono cycle, juggling three metal balls, hence its name. Another interesting piece is the yellow flash beneath it which is the wing tip of a Boeing 737, purchased at Shoreham Airport a few years ago now, just the sort of thing that might fall out of the sky and land on a deserted beach!

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



My mangaves are now in the greenhouse for the winter