GEOFF STONEBANKS
The Driftwood Garden Diary

Gourds bring bright colour inside homes

Geoff and Aster Island series Barbados. Images: Geoff Stonebanks

IT'S Halloween tonight. I've got a small collection of gourds I bought from the garden centre recently to display in the house, pictured out in the garden.

Gourds and pumpkins are classic autumn and Halloween decorations that you can paint, carve, or display around your home.

Children in particular love to carve them and display with a night light inside, perhaps to go trick or treating with! The Jack-o'-lantern has a long history with Halloween, although our favourite demonic faces haven't always been carved out of pumpkins. I was surprised to find from an online search that their origin comes from an Irish myth about Stingy Jack, who tricked the Devil for his own monetary gain. When Jack died, God didn't allow him into heaven, and the Devil didn't let him into hell, so Jack was sentenced to roam the earth for eternity. In Ireland, people started to carve demonic faces out of turnips to frighten away Jack's wandering soul. When Irish immigrants moved to the U.S., they began carving Jack-o'-lanterns from pumpkins, as these were native to the region. You learn something new every day!

A real stunner in my garden all this month has been a pretty aster, one of the Island series called 'Barbados'. You can see the large clump growing behind me. It is a useful perennial for providing late summer colour at the front of perennial borders. It's a compact, clump-forming perennial producing masses of vivid magenta-pink, daisy-like flowers with contrasting golden-yellow centres and its naturally neat habit creates a dense mound of colour, without taking up too much space. Flowering prolifically from late summer into autumn, it provides valuable colour when many earlier-flowering perennials are beginning to fade. The nectar-rich blooms are particularly attractive to bees, butterflies and other pollinating insects. Ideal for beds, border edges and patio containers, this easy-to-grow plant performs best in full sun in fertile, moist but well-drained soil. Deadheading faded flowers will help keep the plant tidy and can encourage a longer flowering display.

Through quite a lot of October, the outdoor temperatures have been reasonably mild, meaning a few evenings have been spent out in the garden. The patio behind the house looks quite magical once the lights are turned on creating a pretty space to enjoy. I have left a few of the smaller agave out this year as it's not the cold they dislike but the wet. Those left out are quite tightly packed in the containers meaning water will not get trapped in the compost and those planted in the vintage colanders should be happy too. It is quite nice to see the turreted tops of the railway sleepers again through the summer months they are concealed with plants tumbling over them.

A really pretty grass growing in a large container in the back garden is Miscanthus nepalensis. It is an ornamental grass providing a stunning display as summer takes hold with airy golden plumes arising on tall, slender stems high above lush mounded foliage.

Ribbons of green leaves cascade in neat arcs, a flowing base for the striking floral spires. It is ideal for borders and gravel gardens too and its delicate tassels shine in autumnal sunlight, holding their gilded colour even as their finch-friendly seeds take shape. I first saw the grass in a friends' garden a few years ago now and fell in love with it, resulting in my purchase. The experts say it is not that hardy and you should keep it sheltered through the winter, but mine has survived several winters unprotected now.

Gourds

A stunning addition to the winter garden is the dazzling pyracantha. I have two shrubs in the garden, one to the left of our front door, pictured, and one at the top of the garden. The colour of the berries is quite striking and they are much loved by the birds too.

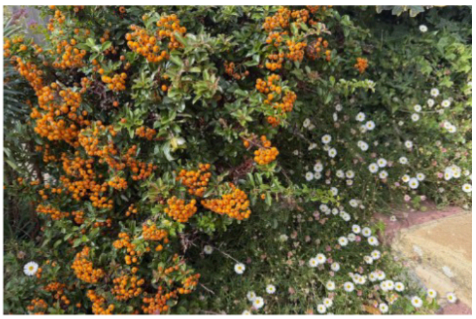
A versatile and vivacious climbing shrub with spiny stems and simple dark green foliage. pyracantha 'orange glow' can be grown as a hedge, up a wall or as a stand-alone plant in containers and open ground. Robust enough to withstand wind and colder weather it offers sustenance to birds and other wildlife during the winter months when it is smothered in bright orange berries.

Furthermore, it produces white, sweetly scented flowers in June and July each year which pollinators, especially bees, love for the nectar they supply. The shrubs are a 'hive' of activity throughout the summer months as a consequence. It prefers to be planted in well-drained soil which benefits from full sun or partial shade. Although it is a very drought tolerant plant, if your shrub is newly planted you must ensure that it is kept watered until it has established a good root structure.

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

Miscanthus nepaensis.

The patio by night



Pyrocantha orange glow