

Gardens for good

Charlotte Pearson heads to Seaford to talk to a man whose garden has raised thousands for charity.

Gardens on the whole are very private affairs. It is the place that after a hard days work, or over the weekend, you chill out and relax in, occasionally pottering about undertaking various jobs to keep it clean and tidy.

But for Geoff Stonebanks, in Seaford, when he retired not only did his hobby become a large part of his life but he also opened up his garden to the public.

Geoff had previously worked for the Royal Mail but then moved from London to the south coast after finishing work.

"I had a lovely garden in London but nothing like this one," he recalls. "When we moved we had one lorry for the furniture and one for the garden."

The first time he opened Driftwood to the public was in 2009 as part of Seaford in Bloom.

"People have always said how nice the garden was so I thought why not," he recalls.

"My mum was staying with us at the time and she said 'they are queueing down the street'. From 2pm until 5pm we had about 300 people look around.

"It was great to get so many compliments as, when you look at your own garden, all you see are the faults."

Through word of mouth and publicised events Geoff's garden has continued to grow, which has resulted in money being raised for charity.

"I have raised a lot for Macmillan and in particular the cancer centre in Brighton," he explains. "We set up Art Wave in 2009 and invited artists to exhibit and donate pieces to sell in a raffle.

"In 2010 we raised £32,000. £13,500 went to Macmillan and the rest went to National Garden Scheme which I am a part of."

Although it is free to look around there is a donation pot in the garden if people wish to give money, and everyone who has a look round is greeted by Geoff himself.

"I try to speak to everyone. I introduce myself and tell them about the garden. Many

people have become friends and help me out when I need it," he smiles.

"I also have a lot of people who come back again and again so I try to ensure every year there is something different.

"I probably work harder now than I did when I had a job and I worked really hard then," Geoff laughs.

However, he does admit he is no garden expert.

"I just know what I know about my garden, what works and what doesn't. There has been a lot of trial and error but I think I have got it now," he adds.

"Macmillan asked if I would host a web chat about gardening but they billed me as a garden expert. So when I was doing it I had one laptop for the web chat and another to look online for the answers. I was very open about it and told people what I did and didn't know."

But living in Seaford has posed some problems for Geoff, especially when it comes to the front of the property.

"It faces the sea so I have to plant things that I know can cope with that, but with pockets of colour in more hidden areas. I have a boat there, some lobster cages and fish pots that were my grandfather's.

"He had his own fish shop in the fifties and the pots have his name on," he reveals. "The back garden is a lot more sheltered and has more of a cottage-style feel to it."

So what would Geoff say to someone thinking of opening up their garden?

"Do it. If people tell you that you should open it to the public and that your garden is good enough even if you don't believe them do it," he enthuses. "I enjoy it so much."

Driftwood garden is open by appointment between June 1 and August 22. There are also open days on July 8 for St Wilfrid's Hospice, July 11 for RNLI and July 26 and 27 for Macmillan.



Picture by Geoff Stonebanks



Picture by Dan Goldsmith



Picture by Geoff Stonebanks



Picture by Russell Sach