

# Garden OF THE WEEK



**Gardener** Geoff Stonebanks  
**Location** Driftwood, Seaford, Sussex  
**Size** Front-garden 30ft x 20ft; rear 100ft long and 40ft at its widest point, tapering to 20ft  
**Soil** Chalk  
**Aspect** Back garden is north facing, front garden is south facing.  
**Been in garden** Since 2004  
**Open** By arrangement until August 11  
**More info** 4 Marine Drive, Seaford, BN25 2RS; driftwoodbysea.co.uk; ngs.org.uk



Coastal items such as nets and lobster pots set the scene. Below, colour reigns with jazzy deckchairs complementing hot planting that includes hydrangeas, geraniums, alstroemeria, salvia, fuchsias and heucheras



Left; Aeoniums and other succulents are stars of the show in this potted paradise area enclosed by upright sleepers. Right, a place to enjoy tea, where frothy *Verbena bonariensis* and stipa grasses, are sheltered from the elements by hedging



As the sun sets you can cast your eye over this fabulous garden from a prime seating spot. Right, the tiny, secluded pond and fountain is a wonderful feature to stumble across as you visit the garden

# A lovely load of rubbish!

When regular GN contributor Geoff Stonebanks retired, he went from novice gardener to expertly transforming his plot into a stunning coastal paradise full of surprises

**Words:** Naomi Slade  
**Photos:** Neil Hepworth  
 Time to garden is a luxury for many, but when Geoff Stonebanks took early retirement and moved to the seaside in 2004, a green-fingered future was not the uppermost thing on his mind.

Back then, his dream home was somewhere that had a garage, a dining room and a garden. In turn, the elderly vendors wanted someone who would enjoy the ample plot around their 1930s chalet-bungalow and although he had no great ambitions for it, it was on his list and a deal was soon done.

"I fitted the bill for them and the property was just what I wanted, but by 2007 I was bored," he explains. "Everything was sorted in the house and I'd done everything I needed to do indoors, but I'm just not a sit on my laurels sort of person, so I started gardening, simply because I don't like to do nothing."

As a complete novice, he started off by engaging a garden designer to draw up some plans, but the relationship didn't last long. "We sat down and talked through lots of ideas and they came back with a drawing, but I took one look and decided to do my own thing. I didn't know anything at the time, but I still felt I could do better than that!"

The garden had been much loved by his predecessors, but in truth there wasn't a lot to it. To the front was just a steep grass bank, while to the rear were two lawns that sloped upwards and sideways, with a path up the middle and the odd mature fruit tree. With the aim of creating usable and level spaces, Geoff started

at the top of the site and worked towards the house. "I inadvertently created garden rooms and this makes the garden seem bigger than it actually is," he says. "This is because you have to navigate it rather than everything being in front of you, all at once. The design has turned out really well, but it happened organically - and I certainly never expected to win any awards!"  
 The landscaping was undertaken by a contractor operating under Geoff's supervision, and when this was done, he set to work on filling the space and dealing with the challenges of an exposed seaside plot that is blessed with free-draining chalky soil.

"The garden started off as very mono-dimensional, and it's very windy. We have these horrendous gales that come off the Atlantic and up the English Channel, so one of the biggest challenges is the wind and the salt that it carries," says Geoff. "Over the years I've put in a lot of plants that can withstand the wind or will act as a windbreak, and this has helped to create sheltered pockets and microclimates."  
 As far as good seaside plants go, Geoff favours *Griselinia littoralis* and *Crambe maritima*, his elaeagnus hedge shelters

birds as well as people and planting, while palm trees, such as jelly palm *Butia capitata* and windmill palm *Trachycarpus fortunei*, are used for their bold form. Not every experiment has been a success, however.

*Continues over the page*



**Fine features**  
Rusty metal arches were an early addition to bring height, structure and a little drama!

**Pretty pots**  
Geoff uses potted bedding and containers filled with feature plants to line the steps, add colour and bulk up the planting

**A green feast**  
Fulsome foliage from a wide array of leafy treats is packed in closely; here euphorbia, ferns and large palms are among the standout shapes



Beautiful succulents in all shapes and sizes feature heavily in Geoff's garden

"The slope means we have good drainage here, so last year I planted out several of the largest agaves into the ground. On chalk they should have been fine, but we had the worst possible winter in terms of cold and wet, so they all died," he says, ruefully. But the defining characteristic of this garden isn't so much the planting, good as it is, but the

number of decorative and structural items that have been included. At an early point, rusty metal arches were used to add a three-dimensional quality and these have been joined by all sorts of found things and interesting objects, from marine buoys, anchors, ceramic items, a 10ft plough and even an old typewriter, many of which have been gifts from repeat visitors. "I describe my garden as an eclectic mix of rubbish with a few plants!" laughs Geoff. "I like

to blend and put things together, and to create rooms that are like those in the house but for summer use only. There's a picture in my head of how I want it to look and I always feel that I'm not gardening so much as dressing a film set!" More recently, the garden design has evolved to become lower maintenance, while still keeping its year-round good looks. A sunken pond has gone and a large new bed is filled with roses and hydrangeas, while the more time-

consuming containers have been reduced in favour of succulents. Geoff has enthusiastically shared his gardening journey with Garden News readers and this year celebrates 10 years of providing monthly updates in our Over The Fence pages. But this isn't his only achievement for 2023. As well as becoming one of just 500 Coronation Champions to mark the coronation of King Charles, his real crowning glory is the staggering amount of money he's raised

for charity (now over more than £160,000) through his garden open days, in particular for Macmillan Cancer Support, which recently honoured him for his efforts. "I'm 70 now and I have dodgy knees, but I plough on. I'm still at it!" says Geoff, cheerfully. "I love gardening, it does so much for mental health and agility. If I'm not doing it, I'm writing about it, but what really drives me to continue is the huge amount of money we make for charity, and when visitors come and say nice things, I'm on cloud nine."

**Geoff's four seaside favourites...**



**Coronilla glauca**  
An evergreen shrub with yellow pea flowers that can be seen intermittently throughout the year, including in winter.



**Bupleurum fruticosum**  
Another evergreen shrub with clusters of pastel-yellow umbel flowers in summer. Good for sun and exposure.



**Agaves**  
Wonderful succulents for pots to bring outside in summer. There's a huge range and all like full sun and well-drained soil.



**Hydrangea 'Annabelle'**  
A large, elegant hydrangea that bears huge white balls of flowers in late summer. A wonderful specimen to stand out on its own.

**... and his top tips**

- 1** Do what your gut tells you to. Many people hang onto the words of experts, but you have to trust your own instincts: the expert in your own garden is you.
- 2** Plants either sink or swim, but they do respond to care. Buy what you like and do your very best to look after it, and it will more often than not survive.
- 3** My garden has no exposed soil and no lawn; there are hard surfaces everywhere and pots are topped with gravel and, as a result, I have no weeds and no slugs and snails.
- 4** Never be afraid to put too many plants in – cramming them in together prevents weeds from getting a foot hold.