



Green and pleasant

It's February already! With any luck we should begin to see the signs of the approaching spring, with bulbs appearing and some wildlife waking up as light levels and temperatures steadily begin to increase. If it's too cold and damp, well maybe there's plenty to do indoors this month too, to prepare for the season ahead. Outdoors, as the garden comes to life again, it's time to prune shrubs and climbers, such as Wisteria as well as evergreen hedges. February feels like a turning point in the garden and the days are getting longer at last. This month's garden jobs are mostly about getting things ready for the spring. But there are also some early sowing and growing tasks to do, if you want to get a head start.

By **Geoff Stonebanks**

For those of us that like to visit gardens through the year then, thankfully, the *National Garden Scheme* has gardens opening this month with lots of beautiful snowdrops to show off. Do please note that 5 Whitemans Close in Cuckfield, is advertised to open in the Sussex booklet, but sadly, it has had to cancel all its 2024 openings for medical reasons. There are lots of other gardens that are open too, providing great walks with your four-legged friends.

The garden at Driftwood

A plant that looks really spectacular in my garden through the winter is miscanthus. They are really reliable grasses that provide interest over a long period. Mine produce fountains of foliage in early summer and bear plumes of white or pink flowers in late summer, then as shown, in the depths of winter these bleach into shades of a pretty biscuity brown. I have a couple of clumps in the beach garden at the front of the house and several in the back garden too.

Flowering profusely in the back porch are several of my aeoniums, they are all on rather large plants so once flowered, I will probably cut the stem back and wait for new growth of the summer.

It all seems to be the yellows that are drawing attention to themselves at the moment. The beautiful flowers on the hellebore *argutifolius* are just coming into their own too. I have two rather large patches of them in the beach garden close to the old rowing boat! Certainly, not a plant you'd necessarily expect to see growing in an exposed beach garden, but that said they have been there over 10 years now and look magnificent through the winter months.

I've recently spent some time tidying up the ferns growing behind the corten steel wall. The recent winds had badly damaged them and they had become very brown. It's quite nice to see the steel wall again from the house, but it won't be long before the new fronds start to appear again.

Snowdrop openings with the National Garden Scheme

A regular favourite snowdrop garden in Sussex is *Pembury House* in Clayton, near Ditchling. This year it has seven open days in February, the 8th, 9th, 15th, 16th, 22nd, 23rd and 29th. Its opening times are 10:30am – 3:30pm on each of those dates BUT pre-booking is essential, visit www.ngs.org.uk for more information & booking details. Timed slots will be available between 10:30am & 2pm with home-made teas included in the price of £11 with children free. Depending on the vagaries of the season the snowdrops will be at their best. It is a country garden, tidy but not manicured with new work always going on. Winding paths give a choice of walks through three acres of garden, which is in and enjoys views of the *South Downs*

National Park. Please wear suitable footwear, macs and winter woollies advised. There will be plants for sale and owners would ideally prefer cash.

Other Sussex snowdrop gardens can be found at *The Old Vicarage* in Washington on four dates, the 8th, 15th, 22nd and 29th, which opens 10am to 5pm each day but with pre-booking essential.

The Manor of Dean in Tillington near Petworth opens on the 18th of the month between 2 and 4pm and *Highdown Gardens* in Goring by Sea on the 15th of the month will full details at www.ngs.org.uk

Wildlife in Winter

Winter can be a difficult time for wildlife. When the temperatures finally plummet and food becomes difficult to find, insect-eating birds turn to alternative foods, some species travel far and wide, and foraging behaviour adapts, but we can lend a helping hand by providing a welcome source of extra food for birds to turn to in leaner times. The *RSPB* says, when buying bird food, try to get a good mix of peanuts, seeds and live food like mealworms and waxworms. Fruit, especially bruised apples and pears, will be popular with thrushes and Blackbirds. Household scraps like pastry, cooked rice and breadcrumbs should only be offered in small amounts occasionally.

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

Geoff is a multi-award-winning garden owner, garden writer & broadcaster. Driftwood has appeared on BBC2 *Gardeners' World* and was a finalist in *Gardeners' World Magazine Best Small Space*. See the amazing 5-star reviews on TripAdvisor. Read all about Geoff's work for the community, appointment as a Coronation Champion and trips to Buckingham Palace including 2 Royal Garden Parties, in 2018 and 2023. Read the many published features on the garden in national, local and worldwide media, including TV.