



A Blooming Good Spring

Geoff Stonebanks shares top tips and inspiration for a diverse and colourful spring garden

It's that time of year when we gardeners focus on the coming spring and new growth. It is a wonderful time of the year in the garden with some gorgeous plants that will make a real statement as they emerge. In the beach garden at the front of my house are two lovely clumps of iris that are just beginning to produce this year's new growth. Over the next few weeks, they will transform into beauties.

A touch of Iris royalty

Irises are loved for their sumptuous, colourful and beautifully marked flowers. The Iris genus comprises a wide range of types that can be grown in a variety

of locations, from pond margins and damp soil to borders, banks, pots and rockeries. Iris is the name of the Greek goddess of the rainbow and, aptly, iris flowers offer a wonderful spectrum of colours. Iris flowers also have a long association with French and English royalty, thanks to the Fleur-de-Lis symbol. Grown in the right spot, irises are easy to grow and long-lived. Most iris flowers bloom in summer, apart from the earliest bulbous types which flower in early spring.

Wonderful wallflowers

Another spring beauty is the wallflower! The best thing about these flowers is the fantastic scent! They



Wallflowers



Fireglow

make the perfect winter and spring bedding, if you keep picking and dead-heading, and they'll flower for months. The plants come in a wonderful range of rich colours and also make superb cut flowers. They look their best when planted in large drifts rather than dotted through garden borders. Try underplanting tulips with wallflowers for a different combination and a stunning spring display. These hardy plants are perfectly suited for the British climate, requiring minimal upkeep but offering maximum rewards.



Euphorbia Characias

A splurge of spurge

Another garden favourite at this time of the year is the dramatic Euphorbia characias, commonly known as Mediterranean spurge. This stunning, evergreen perennial can grow to 1.5m, with vertical or arching biennial stems, leafy at first, then bare, almost woody at the base. Its slender, blue-green, rather downy leaves are up to 15cm long. Then profuse flowers appear, in large, terminal, cylindrical heads in early spring which have petal-like bright yellow-green bracts surrounding the tiny flowers. The stems may be short-lived, but in my experience they more often than not self-seed.

It's ideal for growing in a sunny border or gravel garden, and is a good planting partner for kniphofias, which bear orange and yellow flowers. For best results grow in moist but well-drained soil, in full sun. Cut down the flower stems to ground level as the blooms fade. Take great care when handling the plant as the thick, white sap can irritate the eyes and skin.

Drama and contrast

Euphorbia griffithii 'Fireglow' is equally dramatic in my garden and starting to make a show now. Bearing attractive dark green foliage, each leaf has a reddish midrib, which contrasts beautifully with its bright fiery brick red flowers. Tall and bushy, it's well suited to growing in hot planting schemes and dry sunny borders, and combines well with yellow flowers and gold variegated foliage. Grow Euphorbia griffithii



'Fireglow' in moist but well-drained soil in full sun to partial shade. Divide congested clumps in spring. When working with euphorbias always wear gloves as the milky sap is a skin irritant.

Heady blooms

Another garden favourite in the spring is the ever-popular camellia. They are a perfect plant for a north-facing wall. Camellias are popular evergreen shrubs that produce a beautiful display of flowers from late winter to early spring, when little else is in flower. There are thousands of varieties to choose from, with white, pink or red flowers, which can either be single or double. In their native range of south Asia, camellias are woodland plants, so do best in shade. This makes them useful for growing in shady parts of the garden or as part of a woodland border.

They are acid-loving plants, which means they need to grow in acidic soil, ideally with a pH of around 6 to 6.5. If you're unsure whether you have acid soil or not, you can do a soil test. Although, some camellia varieties can be grown in pots of ericaceous compost. The shrubs do best in dappled shade or full shade. An area that gets morning shade is best as direct sun in the morning can dry out the developing flower buds too quickly. Choose a sheltered spot, as an exposed, windy position is likely to cause leaf and flower damage.



Rhododendron



Brazilian Fuchsia

And reliable favourites

Another lovely shrub for the spring is the rhododendron! Once again, it is acid loving. There are thousands of colourful rhododendron cultivars to choose from in a range of sizes to suit larger gardens or containers. From large blousy blooms in pinks and purples through to more fiery reds, oranges and yellows, rhododendrons are guaranteed to put on a good show of flowers in early summer, as long as you provide the right acidic growing conditions.

They are perfect for patios, are easy to grow and low maintenance. They work well filling gaps in the garden between spring and summer, flowering from April to June. Exotic in appearance, rhododendron bushes make excellent specimen plants or additions to rockeries and alpine gardens. These low maintenance evergreens really do give a spectacular display and provide year-round interest when little else is growing.

Indoor spring sunshine

Jacobinia pauciflora bears long, tubular, brightly coloured blooms from October through to March each year. Flowers have a wonderfully sunny appeal and will bring the sunshine indoors over late autumn,



April in my beach garden



Sociable Driftwood

winter and early spring. Perfect for planting in a container to liven up a conservatory all year-round or locating in a prime spot on a light, bright, windowsill.

As a tender shrub which likes a climate above 10°C, your Jacobinia pauciflora can even enjoy a spell outdoors during the summer months to soak up some warmer temperatures and help build its resilience. Prefers well-drained soil of any kind. Plant in partial shade with a south or east facing aspect. Water little and often whilst establishing your plant, feed regularly and deadhead blooms as required. A gorgeous sub-tropical, evergreen shrub with a height and spread of 60cm. Mine spends most of the year in the heated greenhouse.

Elephant's ears

Another lovely spring plant is the Bergenia. It is an evergreen herbaceous perennial with distinctive glossy, rounded leaves. Their bold foliage gives them their common name of elephant's ears.

Bergenias have often traditionally been consigned to tricky, shady areas of the garden where not much else will grow, but they're actually versatile plants that deserve a prominent spot in your garden. Some modern varieties are more compact than older cultivars, and many have interesting leaf colour in winter – from coral to red to burgundy.



Bergenia



Hector awakes

Their spring flowers, held on short stems, and in shades of magenta, pale pink or white, look excellent with spring bulbs and provide early nectar for pollinating insects. The most important feature for me is that they are low maintenance, drought-resistant and do well in

a wide range of soils, including poor, dry soils and clay. They also grow well in sun or shade. The plant is a great choice for the front of the border, where their bold, rounded foliage contrasts well with plants that have contrasting, finely textured leaves, such as ferns. They also look good in a jungle-style or exotic planting scheme and can be grown in gravel gardens, like the one pictured in my beach garden.

History, heritage and Hector

At Driftwood, our tortoise, Hector, is now over 100 years old. We inherited him from my aunt in 2004 and early spring is when he awakes from his winter hibernation to spend the summer months in the garden delighting not only us but garden visitors too.

Geoff's garden, Driftwood, will open its garden gate for visitors, by arrangement only, from 1st June through until the 2nd August again this summer. E-mail visitdriftwood@gmail.com to make a booking and enjoy his homemade teas served on vintage china in the garden.

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