

LIFE ARGUS

# Blooming good garden rakes in charity funding

Ten years ago Geoff Stonebanks was working for Royal Mail and had never even thought about dedicating his retirement to gardening. But his green-fingered talent has reached a whole new level with his Driftwood Garden, which receives thousands of visitors and has helped him raise more than £60,000 for charity. **FLORA THOMPSON** finds out where he got his inspiration

GEOFF Stonebanks refuses to call himself a gardener.

But his gift, which means all manner of plants survive in his salt wind-bashed seaside plot, speaks for itself.

The retired Royal Mail manager and his partner Mark Glassman arrived in Bishopstone, near Seaford, from London in 2004.

In his new-found spare time, Mr Stonebanks started planting though while some of his relatives were keen gardeners, he had never seen himself as one.

He hunted garden centres for plants recommended for coastal gardens and found there were none.

After a few failed attempts, he threw caution to the wind and decided to fill the 100ft by 40ft plot with the plants and flowers he loved – tending to them through trial and error.

### Unlikely calling

It was something Mr Stonebanks, now 62, had never planned but over the next 10 years, The Driftwood Garden in Marine Drive evolved and slowly took over his life.

He now spends his summer months opening his garden to the public, baking and raking in money for charity.

The winter months are spent preparing for the next year and a lot of time is spent watering.

It means he and Mr Glassman, who still works but is a keen artist in his spare time, no longer go on holiday in the summer months.

Mr Stonebanks said: “I am not a gardener. I never set out to create a garden to raise money for charity. I had taken early retirement and I had no ambitions or aspirations for this. But I am enjoying it the more time I spend doing it. People think I am an expert.

“It is a difficult plot because we face the sea. Buying plants, I realised there are hardly any which are recommended for coastal gardens. There are no level surfaces in the garden and it was quite a small plot.

“I decided to just buy the plants I liked, whatever the directions say, look after them the best I can and see what happens. Around 95 per cent of the time it works.”

To combat the levels of the garden, he started at the house and created nine “rooms”, each with a different theme and focus, gradually transporting you to the top of the plot.

“The first garden you come across



Geoff Stonebanks

is a complete 30 by 30 seaside garden. There are crab pots, anchors and pebbles. I tried to recreate Tide Mills in miniature.

“Then as you move through the garden you find the whole back of the house is a massive, continuous wall of flowers – I have used a number of pots to create this illusion.”

As the levels continue, there is a table and chairs surrounded by Shasta daisies, plenty of spaces for visitors

to sit and tuck into tea and cake, a series of planted gravel beds, a flower-adorned fireplace and features including the tip of a Boeing 737 aeroplane to spot as you travel through the garden.

Before he knew, it neighbours were roping him into Seaford in Bloom, urged him to join the National Gardens Scheme and enter competitions.

He said: “It’s quite a small garden but visitors and judges of competi-

tions say it always seems quite a lot bigger because it’s broken down into different areas.

“I worked hard at Royal Mail over the years but I think since I have retired I have worked even harder on the garden.

“The garden comes alive when people are in it.”

His creativity has attracted much local and national attention. He appeared in newspapers and on televi-

sion and visitor numbers soared.

Since 2009, he has had 12,650 visitors, raised £61,250 for charities and served 5,000 portions of homemade cake.

He has opened his garden to the public more than 100 times and it is now an annual event as part of the National Gardens Scheme. He also helps the scheme with publicity and is its county organiser.

He spends thousands of pounds a

year on plants and plant food and is asked to test out seeds by plant company Thompson and Morgan.

The Macmillan Garden Trails he launched in aid of Macmillan Cancer Support have also grown in popularity.

He encourages people to open their gardens to visitors in aid of the charity. It is becoming something of an annual event locally and continues to grow. He hopes the fundraising idea

will be rolled out on a national scale.

He said: “All the publicity has helped get people in the door. We’ve only been on TripAdvisor for five months and people have left some lovely comments. I think ‘are these people really talking about me and my garden?’ It’s quite amazing.”

Lynda Thomas, chief executive of Macmillan Cancer Support, met Mr Stonebanks in Brighton on Tuesday and thanked him for his contribution

of £3,200 towards the new Horizon Centre which is due to open next year.

● The Driftwood Garden opens again in June and Mr Stonebanks hopes to raise another £15,000 for charity. To find out more, visit driftwoodbysea.co.uk.

● Anyone who would like their garden to be part of the Macmillan Coastal Garden Trail in July next year can call 01323 899296 or visit macmillangardentrail.co.uk.



Mr Stonebanks' favourites, Fuchsia Empress of Prussia, above, Gazania Sunbathers Tikal Exotic, above right, Shasta daisies, bottom right, and, below, his award-winning garden



## Geoff's favourite flowers

- 1 Shasta daisies
- 2 Fuchsias like the Empress of Prussia
- 3 Amistad Salvia
- 4 Gazania Sunbathers Tikal Exotic
- 5 Lilies, which have flourished since Mr Stonebanks inherited one from his late aunt