



"Our tiny garden is packed with plants!"

This pretty coastal garden is packed with personality – and there's no room for weeds! Owner Geoff Stonebanks treats us to a tour



COTTAGE BY THE SEA (opposite) A faux door behind fuchsia 'Empress of Prussia' and heuchera 'Southern Comfort'
ABOVE (clockwise): a rowing boat creates a windbreak for penstemon 'Red Button', *Verbena rigida* 'Polaris' and cineraria 'Silver Dust'; Geoff's dad's lobster pot with *Crambe maritima* (sea kale) and carex 'Ice Dance'; the lonely pampas grass had to go



IN THE GARDEN WITH...

Geoff Stonebanks and Mark Glassman

AT Driftwood, 4 Marine Drive, Bishopstone, Seaford BN25 2RS
SIZE OF GARDEN 34 x 14.6m (112 x 48ft)

GARDEN FEATURES Exuberant seaside garden divided into rooms
VISIT Open 10 June, 1 and 17 July, 3 August (11am-5pm) for NGS; 22 June for Open Garden Trail; 8 July for St Wilfrid's Hospice; 11 July for RNLi; 26-27 July for Macmillan Coastal Garden Trail; 23-25 Aug, 30-31 Aug and 6-7 Sept for Artwave festival. Open by appointment 1 June-22 Aug
CONTACT Call 01323 899296 or visit www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk

What this dazzling seaside plot lacks in size, it certainly makes up for in personality. "I struggled to find words to describe it for the Yellow Book," admits owner Geoff Stonebanks. "Although it's not very big, it's so full of plants that it takes ages to explore. When you're actually walking round, it feels so much bigger."

At last count there were more than 400 different plants and shrubs in the back garden, and another 100 in the front. "I have no lawn at all," says Geoff, "and no exposed soil so there's no space for weeds. It's a complete mass of colour. When people come through the gate their jaws drop, especially given the fact it belongs to a fairly boring, conventional house."

Geoff began gardening here in 2004 after spending most of his adult life in north London. "I was very fortunate to get early retirement from the Royal Mail, but my partner Mark and I couldn't afford to keep living in Barnet. We must have looked at 140 different houses along the south coast

and this was the only one we both liked. Even then it didn't meet all our criteria, as it was too close to the sea. Everything else was just right though."

When they arrived here the sloping back garden comprised two lawns with a path up the middle, borders round the edge and a giant pampas grass in the centre. "It was a real struggle to maintain the lawns and push the mower up the hill," says Geoff. "Then in 2007 my dad sold some shares and gave me and my brother half the money. I used my share to buy a summerhouse and build a patio in front of it, and the renovation started from there."

Geoff's biggest gardening challenge is the salt-laden wind that assaults the garden. "The wind whistles off the Atlantic and hits us full on. It was important to create windbreaks to take the brunt off, and to avoid planting anything too tall."

The front garden gets the biggest hit: here Geoff has used a rowing boat, salvaged sea groynes and sleepers as a windbreak, planting an assortment of irises, geums and geraniums in its shelter.



QUIRKY TOUCHES (clockwise from left) Wrought iron arches create height, with daylilies and limonium (sea lavender); poppy sculptures liven up an evergreen *Griselinia littoralis* hedge; salvaged sea groynes and lobster pots in the shingly front garden; how the garden fits together; floats and ropes around the feet of a *Butia palm* and sea kale; brick paving and raised beds with *Verbena bonariensis*, ivy and hebe; leucanthemum 'Snow Lady' flowers on this sheltered patio; tea cups perch on the top of the hedge – and why not?!



Coastal plants such as sea kale, rosemary and grasses such as *Stipa tenuissima* have found a foothold in the shingle. “We had the worst winter ever this year, yet the front garden looks unscathed,” says Geoff.

A small wooden jetty leads over a stretch of water to the back garden where Geoff had a builder create raised beds from bricks and made the sleeper beds himself. Rusted metal structures complement the planting and an assortment of marine accessories have a personal resonance for Geoff – such as his late father’s old fishing basket. “He and my grandfather were fish merchants in Fleetwood in the 1950s,” explains Geoff. “I’ve also used six of my grandfather’s old fish crates with his name on the side. And I’ve added to the collection with some lobster pots off eBay.” Driftwood and ropes add further textural interest.

“Originally my dream was to have a cottage garden,” says Geoff. “When we moved here from Barnet we had a lovely garden filled with plants in pots. I warned the buyer not to get too attached to the garden as we were taking it all with us – even the watering system. We brought it all here not realising that the environment would be so different. I lost half the plants in that first winter.”



Fortunately the bottom left-hand corner of the garden enjoys more shelter than the rest, so Geoff has been able to indulge his cottage garden dream by planting favourites such as evening primrose, Shasta daisies and achillea ‘Moonshine’.

“The planting is primarily about structure,” says Geoff. “It all looks quite stunning in winter – with hedges of *Griselinia littoralis*, *Olearia traversii*

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‘Tweedledum’ and lots of small conifers such as *Juniperus chinensis* ‘Blue Alps’ and *Thuja occidentalis* ‘Sunkist’. Then we’ve got *Euphorbia mellifera*, ivy, bay and palms, which we wrap in fleece over winter. I have about 12 large variegated agaves too. They’re large and growing in containers, so I can just about move them into our covered side alley over winter for protection.”

Although Geoff dotes on all his plants, treating them to a regular dose of Miracle Grow throughout the growing season, those with a personal connection are his favourites. “My late father and his sister

were both very keen gardeners so I’ve inherited a lot of their plants. I have my aunt’s favourite orange lilies in the same ceramic pot she kept them in, and they still come out every year.”

Geoff also propagates lots of fuchsias for sale at his charity openings, taking cuttings from his aunt’s fuchsia ‘Genii’ and his dad’s fuchsia ‘Empress of Prussia’. “I’ve got a collection of about 20-25 different fuchsias now,” says Geoff. “I propagate from my ferns as well.”

Geoff and Mark don’t take much of a break in summer. “The garden is open so often that we can’t get away on holiday,” Geoff explains. “We first opened it to the public in 2009 and since then we’ve had 8,000 visitors, raising £13,500 for Macmillan and £32,000 for other charities.

“Mark has his art studio at the top of the garden and we take part in the Artwave festival every year; it runs across three weekends and we have 14 artists exhibiting in the garden. So, we play host to two audiences here – the gardeners and the artists. I enjoy getting the feedback and because the garden is small it means people can relate to it and get ideas for their own gardens. The garden really comes alive when there are people in it!”

PHOTOGRAPHS JONATHAN NEEDS; DAN GOLDSMITH