

Don't dig for victory, dig for charity...

Geoff Stonebanks, a former finalist in our National Garden Competition, on how he's raised almost £50k

Making it to the final of the Daily Mail National Garden Competition in 2012 changed Geoff Stonebanks's life. 'Getting to the last four and hearing the judges' praise gave me the most tremendous boost and made me see the garden with fresh eyes,' he says. 'It instilled me with new confidence. After that all sorts of interesting things started to happen.'

Geoff, now 62, and his partner, 58-year-old teacher Mark Glassman, moved to Bishopstone in East Sussex in 2004 when Geoff took early retirement from his job as a Royal Mail manager. Their 1936 bungalow came with a 34m x 14.6m (112ft x 48ft) garden and, with plenty of time on his hands, Geoff set about tackling it. 'The garden sloped so steeply

there wasn't a single spot to put a table and chairs, and being so close to the sea it was constantly buffeted by salt spray and strong winds. I'd brought 160 containers of plants with me from London, and lost half of them in the first winter.'

Gradually though, Geoff got to grips with his new plot. He terraced it and divided it into a cottage garden at the front and a coastal gravel garden at the back. While some plants like delphiniums couldn't cope with the conditions, others like palm trees, olive trees, fuchsias and



Geoff Stonebanks (left) and his garden Driftwood (above)



even grapevines all flourished. Geoff now grows 600 varieties of plants, which jostle for space with quirky objects like stained-glass panels, a boat,

lobster pots, netting and the driftwood that gives the garden its name.

Geoff and Mark had already been opening their garden for charity in a low-key way, but after their success in the competition they moved up a gear. 'We suddenly saw there was the potential to raise a lot of

money for charity through the garden if we really worked at it,' Geoff explains. They've now become expert fundraisers and hold regular open days from June to September. They work hard publicising the garden, raising plants to sell and baking endless scones and cakes. 'You cannot run out of cakes,' says Geoff. 'Visitors come for the tea as much as the garden.'

In all, he and Mark have raised £47,000 through the garden, with money going to Macmillan Cancer Support, the National Gardens Scheme, the RNLI, a local hospice, an HIV centre and the local church. 'Opening for charity adds a huge amount to the pleasure I get from my garden,' Geoff admits. 'I love showing people round and chatting to them, and knowing I'm also raising money for good causes just adds to the buzz. It's a full-time job for me now, and I absolutely love it.'

Constance Craig Smith

Driftwood is open by appointment until 30 September and has regular open days throughout the summer. Visit geoffstonebanks.co.uk

Want to use your garden for fundraising? Here are Geoff's top tips...

- See if your garden is suitable for inclusion in the National Gardens Scheme (see ngs.org.uk). Even if it isn't, you can open the garden under your own steam for good causes.

HOW TO DO YOUR BIT

- Publicising open days is vital – after all, you want lots of people to turn up. Use local newspapers and social media like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.
- Make sure there's

somewhere safe and legal for visitors to park.

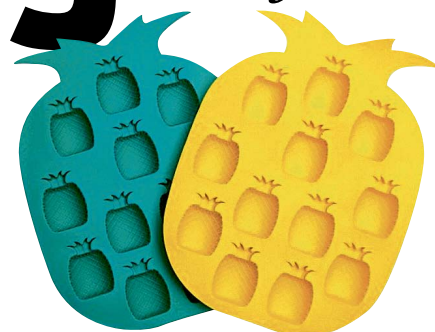
- Be on hand to chat to visitors and answer questions; make everyone who comes feel welcome
- Garden visitors love their

teas, so create plenty of seating areas where they can enjoy a break. Bake more cakes than you think you'll need – choose ones that can be frozen if not required.

- You'll make extra money by propagating plants to sell. Rope in green-fingered friends to help with this.

5 OF THE BEST... GARDEN PARTY ESSENTIALS

Make your summer bash go with a bang...



▲ **Ice cool** The temperature at a British garden party might not be tropical, but with these pineapple ice trays your drinks certainly will be. £12 for two, oliverbonas.com



▼ **Sound of summer** Invest in a colourful Bluetooth speaker like the Bose Soundlink Colour to provide a soundtrack to your party. £119.95, bose.co.uk



▲ **Sizzling hot** For smaller gatherings, a bright bucket BBQ looks good and takes up minimal space. £8, in store at larger Sainsbury's or call 0800 328 1700.



▲ **Splash of colour** String this bunting in your bushes for a simple yet striking bit of decoration. £12 for 5 metres, cottonbunting.co.uk

◀ **Help yourself** Avoid flies in your cocktail jug – fill up a drinks dispenser and let guests serve themselves from the tap. £8, in store at larger Sainsbury's or call 0800 328 1700.

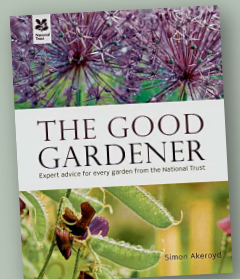
Things to do this week



Visit this...

The Swiss Garden

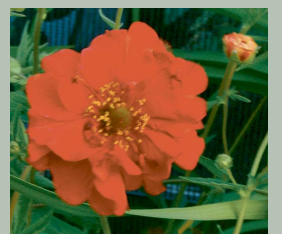
This quirky Regency garden in Bedfordshire, with its 'alpine' landscape of tumbling waterfalls and steep slopes, has been brought back to life after a major Lottery-funded restoration. There are also 13 beautiful listed buildings in the grounds. Open daily, 9.30am-5pm. Entry £8. shuttleworth.org/swiss-cottage.



Read this...

The Good Gardener

Custodian of many of our most famous gardens, the National Trust has a wealth of know-how that all gardeners can benefit from. This book by Simon Akeroyd contains advice from many of the Trust's head gardeners, covering everything from getting started through to landscaping and how to nurture your garden. National Trust Books, £20.



Click on this...

specialplants.net

The Special Plants Nursery in Chippenham, Wiltshire, is famous for its wonderful range of unusual plants. Run by legendary American-born plant hunter Derry Watkins, the nursery produces an enticing seed catalogue that's available online, with seeds priced at £2 a packet. To buy plants you have to visit in person, 10am-5pm daily.

DIG THIS See a magnificent display of bonsai trees at Capel Manor Gardens, Enfield, 10am-4pm tomorrow. 08456 122122