

# DROUGHT TOLERANT GARDENS

**BY GEOFF STONEBANKS**  
GARDENING MEDIA WRITER

*Having worked in senior management until being able to retire early, Geoff Stonebanks is now a well-established gardening media writer and owner of a multi-award-winning garden, Driftwood, on the south coast that raises thousands of pounds for charity annually and which has received scores of outstanding reviews on Trip Advisor. Through his weekly and monthly gardening features, both online and in print, local and national, he writes about his own plot and provides easy to follow, constructive advice and guidance for others. He is also a long time garden opener and volunteer for the National Garden Scheme in Sussex.*

With the worrying trend in the last few years of scorching summers and the inevitable hose-pipe bans, many gardeners are having to think very carefully about their plots. As someone who has opened their own garden for 14 years and seen in excess of 23,000 visitors since 2009, it is vitally important for me to ensure that my garden looks its very best for family, friends and especially, paying visitors throughout the summer months and beyond.

Until a few years ago, that meant filling the garden with 300 plus containers, proudly displaying hundreds of summer annuals, very easily purchased from local nurseries and garden centres. Something had to give, not only was it becoming time-consuming and extremely stressful in times of a hose pipe ban, but it was



Above and left: Geoff's multi award-winning garden, Driftwood, on the south coast

becoming increasingly more difficult, as I approach 70 this year. My garden, introduced on Gardeners' World by Monty Don with the words "we've been across Britain, looking at inspiring planting and design and this week we're at Driftwood in East Sussex, small garden by the sea, that's full of character", has had a well-established reputation for the amazing colours, created by the many vibrant displays each summer, as seen in many garden media publications at home and abroad. I and many other gardeners have become very conscious of the need to find alternative ways to inspire family, friends and visitors, encompassing the many issues around drought tolerance. This is something very timely for garden centres to really take on board

too. Like many garden-owners, both those who open and I guess many others, I decided there had to be an easier way of creating that necessary wow factor to sustain visitor interest and make life a little easier for myself in my 70's but at the same time creating something that I too enjoyed looking out on from the kitchen window!

"Gardening through the use of drought tolerant plants enables us to do our bit for the environment with the resulting reduced water use"





Climate change will continually present garden owners with the challenge of using much less water, thereby forcing them to choose plants to suit their growing conditions becoming far more paramount. Gardening through the use of drought tolerant plants enables us to do our bit for the environment with the resulting reduced water use. Not to mention the reduction on household bills if metered. It has been said that around two-thirds of domestic water used on hot summer days goes on gardens, which is going to be extremely hard to sustain. We have all experienced the recent low rainfall, even in February this year, meaning water companies then consider asking gardeners to reduce their water consumption or enforce bans.

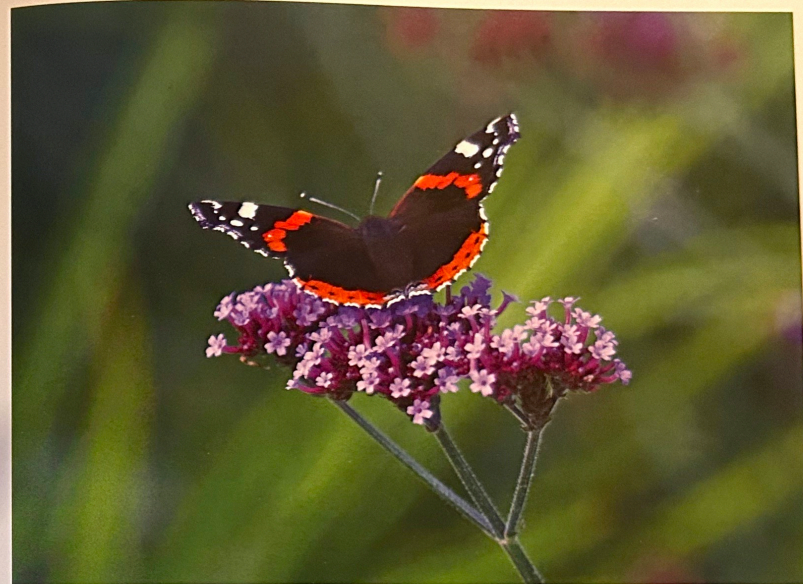


Beautiful displays are still possible by utilising succulents such as aconiums, mangave, agave, sedums and sempervivums, all of which are great drought resistant plants with some lovely varieties available that equally attract bees and other pollinators. They are able to store water in their fleshy

leaves and stems during wetter spells, and draw on that moisture when needed. Back in the autumn of 2021, I personally decided to make major changes to my own garden, in order to facilitate more space to display my existing drought tolerant collection, along with many new additions. I opted to



Above: Geoff utilised upturned railway sleepers to create a backdrop to his new patio



create a patio bounded by upturned railway sleepers that created the perfect backdrop for displaying some of my collection, along with the extended use of many geraniums, pelargoniums, eucomis, osteospermum and gazania. Potted palms and ferns greatly added to the mix. I have found that over the years, there has always been a small selection of suitable plants available in garden centres. That said, there ought to be a much wider choice made available, I have to confess to making many of my appropriate purchases hitherto, online, due to the sheer frustration of not being able to find what I want locally. How much simpler it would be for your customers to be able to pop to their local garden centre and pick up what they need. How wonderful it would be to find our

local centres brimming with ideas for a more drought tolerant approach, with a real focus on some of the best plants to use. Great choices I've found in my garden are verbenas bonariensis (above), perfect plants to sway in the breeze, especially appropriate in a seaside garden like mine. The many colours of osteospermum work well too, along with euphorbia, two of my favourites being griffithii fireglow and mellifera. Many gardeners need to be educated about trying to make their gardens more resistant to drought and advising them that it is not necessarily about digging them up and starting again, but thinking about appropriate soil cultivation, plant choice and garden maintenance. Using different plants may mean that the feel of the garden will

change, but dramatic plantings can easily be achieved from plants that have very low moisture and maintenance demands, how wonderful it would be to see planted up examples in more garden centres that can clearly show customers what is really possible. A design trick much used in my own garden is to plant everything close together to make sure there's no open ground that will dry out faster in the summer sun. The addition of water features and fountains around the plot also adds a cooling effect, no matter how hot and dry the weather gets. Read more on Geoff's award-winning garden here: [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk)