

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Emptying the summer house



Gunnera unfurling



Applying WD40 to a rusty garden sculpture

## Using the brighter days to get everything out and on display

I AM very pleased to be able to confirm, I shall resume my updates, for the 12th year, on BBC Radio Sussex tomorrow, 14th April.

The session should be broadcast at about 11.40am with me, once again, talking about gardens that open for the National Garden Scheme across Sussex with host, Pat Marsh. The only difference this year is that the broadcasts will be weekly, not monthly. Tune in if you can.

Some gardens open for the scheme this weekend include Rymans near Chichester, which has a collection of walled and other gardens to see, with many unusual and rare trees and shrubs. On Sunday, two gardens are opening, 47 Denmans Lane in Linfield will have an extensive choice of perennial and annual bedding plants for sale in addition to homemade jams. Over in Groombridge, Penns in the Rocks also opens with bluebells and azaleas on show. Full details on all at [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)

We've been blessed with some warmer, sunny days. That, coupled with the extra hour in the garden, has meant lots has been achieved. The annual ritual of emptying the summer house of its eclectic mix of treasures has been completed and all the rusty metal pieces have been sprayed with WD40, to aid their protection through the summer months outside. The summer house has had a good clean and all the furniture neatly arranged inside, ready for upcoming visitors to enjoy their tea and cake, on less dry days. I always enjoy positioning the sculpture back in the garden and feel as though I'm dressing a film set, taking great care where each piece is placed.

Indoors, a great addition to the floral display around my office desk are tillandsia. Commonly known as air plants, they originate from Mexico and South America. They are so-named because they use their short, wiry roots to attach themselves to branches, cliff-faces, even electricity and telephone lines, rather than rooting in soil. The most important considerations when cultivating air plants are their requirements for air, light, water and warmth. Plants can be

placed outside in the summer in the UK to benefit from the brighter conditions, rainfall and increased humidity but return them under glass or bring indoors in early autumn.

Tillandsia have leaves coated in specialised water-absorbent cells called trichomes which in some species are so dense they give the plants a silvery, frosted appearance. The trichomes are their primary method of obtaining moisture from rainfall or fog. Plants are often grown on gnarled wood, or shells and rocks to which they are glued for support. The ornamental appearance of tillandsia and their colourful, exotic-looking flowers make them intriguing and popular plants to grow in the home and conservatories. Two of my collection currently have pretty, delicate mauve flowers appearing, enhancing their beauty.

It won't be long before I start filling up the large containers in the garden with some summer colour. I've been tidying them up in readiness. Some, like the one pictured have hardy geraniums in, which are already starting to flower. I'll probably top up with the same as last year, a mix of geraniums, osteospermum and gazania, as they are more drought tolerant than the usual summer bedding.

One of my favourite plants in the garden, that makes a real dramatic statement all summer, is a compact gunnera. You can grow them in permanently damp, humus-rich soil in a sheltered spot in full sun to partial shade, such as the edge of a pond. Mine is in a large ceramic container, behind the corten steel water feature. Gunnera are herbaceous perennials, so the spectacular foliage will die back at the end of the summer. They may need protection from frost damage over winter. Those in containers are best placed in a frost-free spot over winter. I wrap the container with a couple of layers of bubble wrap and carefully fleece the crown of the plant. As the plant comes to life in April or May, deeply veined, jagged-edged leaves are held horizontally on robust, upright, prickly stems. Large, conical spikes of reddish-green



Tidying overwintered containers

flowers will emerge around the base of the plant in late spring too.

I have always been fascinated and loved hydrangeas from a very early age. My maternal grandmother had virtually all her coastal garden on the north west coast brimming with them, many were bright blues too. I have several in my garden now, Annabelle, Limelight, Red Barron and Vanille Fraise, to name but a few. I have started to trim the dead flower heads from them, taking care not to damage the new shoots beginning to appear. Many had already been removed by strong winds this winter too.

One of my all-time favourites is Vanille Fraise, which is perfect on the north facing wall behind the house, providing spectacular late summer colour.

Read more of Geoff's garden at [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk)



Flowering tillandsia