HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY

A garden by the sea – small and perfectly formed

It's not just the planting scheme that entices visitors to this Sussex plot – it's also the tea and home-made cakes

Francine Raymond

Since he opened his garden to the public in 2009, Geoff Stonebanks has made 4,483 cups of tea and served 4,035 slices of home-made cake. More than 11,000 visitors have passed through his gate, raising £60,000 for various charities. Par for the course in leafy Sussex, until you realise the sloping plot is just 82ft by 48ft and Geoff refuses to describe himself as a gardener.

We visited on a stormy day when roads flooded, fire engines were called out, gutters failed, and the sheeting rain obliterated our view through the tiny porch and dangerous cacti, over marshes to the thundery seaside horizon.

Waiting for a gap in the clouds, we were regaled with the sort of generous hospitality that all visitors receive: our tea and cake on proper china from a collection of 140 vintage pieces, and entertained with the tale of the garden's evolution from neat Thirties bungalow surround to the flower-packed extravaganza it is today.

Stonebanks, a retired Royal Mail manager and his partner Mark Glassman, an artist, arrived in Seaford, near Lewes, from London in 2004 with two removal vans, one full of plants that instantly perished thanks to the salty winds. Geoff persevered with the garden: it evolved, passers-by suggested opening to the public, and finally he was bullied into taking part in 'Seaford in Bloom'. His mother took the entrance money, helped by Albert, their Battersea terrier, and jaws dropped, visitors told their friends and Geoff hasn't looked back.

In 2010 he watched a documentary series on television where hopeful gardeners tried to get accepted by the National Gardens Scheme (which, I feel, did the NGS a massive disservice and probably dissuaded many prospective openers).

Terrified, he was none the less welcomed with open arms, and is now their publicity and county organiser. With the help of a band of volunteers, Geoff has also developed his own Macmillan charity garden trail that he hopes to use as a national fundraising model, where horticultural prowess is not the main criteria.

He's involved in many local causes, and the garden is used as an outdoor gallery by artists.

Cheerful victims of their own success, the couple no longer go away between May and September, and winter is spent preparing for the following year, organising their schedule. Their kitchen is piled high with crockery, their garden shed doubles as a shop and there isn't a centimetre of bare soil to be seen. Watering is the main daily chore, especially the 150 pots (top tip: Geoff scrunches tinfoil in the base to create extra reservoirs, then tops the surface with gravel).

The coast is clear: Geoff Stonebanks, top, has combined eye-catching props with plants he 'simply likes the look of' to create a popular garden

'Geoff's garden is used as an outdoor gallery by artists'

He spends nearly £1,000 a year on annuals and half that amount again on granular and liquid plant food. The soil is "chalk topped with 18 inches of rubbish", but frosts are rare. Few of his plants are seaside friendly. A griselina hedge shelters less hardy annuals and sea kale pops up in the gravel, but Geoff's maxim is to find space for anything he likes the look of.

Rain continued to cascade as I browsed the garden's Trip Advisor reviews: "Charm and colour"; "amazing cake"; "V. friendly people"; "Best garden ever visited"'; while Geoff gave two ladies driving directions from East Grinstead, and calmly accepted news of the cancellation of a mini bus from Poole.

Geoff gave me recipes for his top cakes: a Mary Berry Victoria sponge, an M&S All-in-One cappuccino cake and his chickpea and oregano savoury muffins. This week's lunch menu (available booked in advance) includes a ricotta cheesecake and salad.

Then the sky cleared, and we moved out to the back garden to see what all the fuss is about. A stunning wall of colour greeted us, banked high up the slope with narrow paths leading up through terraced seating areas, each with a different theme: a tiny meadow of marguerites around a metal table and chairs, a potted gunnera with a water feature, and every inch covered with blooms. *Gazania* 'Sunbathers Tikal', pelargoniums 'Rimfire' and 'Meadowside Midnight', *scaevola* 'Saphira' and *Francoa sonchifolia* 'Petite Bouquet' all crammed in front of climbing roses and lofty tropical palms.

Each minute area is populated with props: small pebbled beaches complete with driftwood and shells; tiny tropical jungles with masks and succulents; and a fabulous little butterfly garden with Thompson & Morgan's magenta dwarf buddleia 'Buzz'. I was overwhelmed and charmed, and wondered how so many have fitted into such a perfectly formed space? Geoff 's enthusiasm is catching and he and his amazing garden deserve every visitor that makes their way up his enchanting garden path.

The Driftwood Garden is open for charity throughout the season for dates see driftwoodbysea.co.uk. To visit for the NGS, see ngs.org.uk and the garden can also be visited by appointment