

Gardens Galore

Gardening writer, Geoff Stonebanks, shares his pick of the best for a summer garden full of interest and colour

Spring is an uplifting and hopeful time of year for many of us as we watch the natural world burst into life. More importantly, as the weather gets warmer and the days get longer, many gardeners will be busy sowing seeds and preparing flower borders.

Making the most of May

April was a good month to plant perennials, sow hardy annuals like marigolds and plant summer-flowering bulbs like lilies and gladioli. Late May is a good time to prepare your beds by removing weeds and digging and raking the soil. As daffodils and other spring bulbs die back you can start dividing crowded clumps to help spread them out next year. During dry spells, you should water plants at the beginning and end of the day.

I always fill my containers in early May, to get the garden ready for opening on the 1st June. Over the years, I have drastically reduced them in number and changed the plants I use too. Gone are the pots brimming with beautiful petunias and the like and in their place geraniums, pelargoniums and osteospermums. As climate change takes hold it is much easier to maintain plants that are more drought tolerant, therefore requiring less watering. Whilst I always loved petunias, they used to get badly damaged by heavy downpours and looked very bedraggled when I needed them to be looking their very best!

At this time of the year, there are also many spring bulbs still evident around the garden like tulips, daffodils and muscari. Muscari is a genus of perennial bulbous plants native to Eurasia that produce spikes of dense, most commonly blue, urn-shaped flowers resembling bunches of grapes in the spring. The common name for the genus is grape hyacinth, but they should not be confused with hyacinths.



Tulips, muscari and daffodils at Driftwood

Ferns emerging

Blossom, ferns, tulips and daffs

Fronds of fern

Bursting forth in the garden are the amazing fronds of my large collection of ferns, which are perfect for adding that ornamental and often exotic feel to your garden display. Like few other shrubs, ferns can offer a fresh garden look and feel, and they are a great shade loving plant too. They are beautiful foliage plants that vary in shapes and sizes, so you can choose something that will add stature, such as a tree fern or royal fern, or opt for the lower-growing specimens. All mine are hardy ferns, which are tolerant of cold winter temperatures and can be grown outdoors year-round. The great thing about a fern if it is planted in the ground is that there is nothing that needs to be done to protect it in the winter. And in my garden, they look so dramatic with their emerging fronds set against the corten steel wall behind.

Beautiful blossom

Another favourite at this time of the year is the pretty apple blossom. Most apple varieties have pure white blossom, although before the flowers are fully open, they usually have a crimson-pink tinge. In some varieties the pink colour is retained. In most varieties the leaves open at about the same time as the blossom and provide an attractive fresh green backdrop. Apple blossom time is spread out over a number of weeks, months even, from April through to June. This has enormous advantages both for the decorative nature of the apple tree flowers, and for the fruit to follow. I have two apple trees and one pear tree in my garden and they always look so pretty.



Support's Fundraising Manager in the South East, Megan, a few years ago and is in a large container on the rear patio.

Apple blossom on Cox's Orange Pippin

Rose Macmillan Nurse

Rose Tess of the D'Urbervilles

Hoads of hostas

Starting to come into their own at this time of year are the hostas. In my garden, they are very different plants in beautiful



Clockwise:

Hostas

Sea campion

Crambe maritima

shades of green. I have to confess to having had them for a such a long time now that their individual names escape me. Visitors are always impressed with their appearance, never showing signs of slug or snail damage. Whilst there has to be a lot of luck involved, I always find it helps to place them on an island. Position a large saucer on the ground, invert a slightly smaller one inside and pop the pot on top and keep the larger saucer filled with water. It certainly seems to work for me.

Scents of the sea

Being so close to the sea, I enjoy having a variety of coastal plants around the garden. One in particular is the pretty sea campion. It will grow wild on cliff ledges and mountainous rocks throughout this country. The plant forms flat mats of glaucous green leaves with large white flowers in summer borne on long trailing stems. It will need a well-drained sunny position in a rockery, front of the border, on walls or even in pots and containers.

Another firm seaside favourite is Crambe Maritima, commonly known as sea kale. It is a striking plant that is both ornamental and edible. The large leaves are a lovely glaucous green, with wavy edges, and in summer these are crowned with a cloud of tiny white perfumed flowers. Its nectar-rich flowers are great for attracting pollinating insects. As the name suggests, sea kale is often found growing wild on the coast. In gardens, it looks good planted in dry sunny beds or into gravel, with other plants that favour



this habitat, such as knifphofia and thrift. Or you could include it in your vegetable plot and harvest the young shoots in spring to eat raw or steamed – they taste like asparagus. For best results, grow sea kale in full sun or partial shade in fertile, very well-drained soil. The position needs to be deep enough to accommodate the long tap root of the plant with plenty of space for it to spread out. I have several large clumps in my beach garden with the one pictured growing through a large lobster pot in the back garden.

Big for bees

Growing well, in both containers and in the ground at Driftwood are large specimens of Honey spurge, or Euphorbia mellifera. It is a handsome, semi-evergreen shrub native to Madeira and the Canary Islands. It has become a popular garden plant for its honey-scented summer flowers, which are popular with bees, attractive domed growth habit and waxy leaves. It can be grown in full sun or partial shade



Beautiful bottlebrush

A relatively unusual shrub, a native of Australia, in the back garden is my Callistemon, or white bottlebrush. They have become popular in Europe because of the spectacular flowers in axillary spikes, which look like bottle brushes. In colder areas they can be grown in pots, kept under cover in winter, given plenty of water during the flowering period, little in winter. They require moist, well-drained soil and will withstand pruning and drought. The abundant white bottlebrush flowers it produces in mid to late summer look absolutely stunning as you can see. This shrub was a gift from a friend who sadly passed away back in 2012, so it is a lovely reminder of her every summer. My shrub is planted in the ground, so I ensure it has 2 or 3 good fleeces wrapped around it through the winter months to protect it. Every May I pull the covers off and there are already pretty flowers to be seen.

Left:

Euphorbia mellifer

Mangaves transferred
out into the garden for
the summer

Right:

White bottlebrush

Geoff being filmed for
Gardeners' World



Have a wonderful summer in the garden and maybe book a visit to see Driftwood, between 1st June and 31st July by emailing

visitdriftwood@gmail.com

You may have seen the garden on BBC Gardeners' World on 22nd March, if not you can view it on BBC iPlayer or through my website at

www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk

and will vary in habit depending on the sunlight it receives. In full sun it will develop a denser, more compact shape and in shadier spots a looser and taller habit. It looks brilliant growing in exotic borders or gravel gardens. It can be pruned back hard in spring if it starts to get too leggy, but remember to wear gloves when pruning, as the milky white sap can irritate the skin and eyes.

Magnificent mangaves

A relatively new plant to add to the garden in the summer months is the mangave. With their awesome colours and bold silhouettes, they really strike a pose on the patio! These unusual succulents form fleshy rosettes of evergreen spiky leaves edged with soft spines. Displayed as a collection they make a stylish design statement as you can see from the collection on my patio at Driftwood. Their strong symmetry and glowing colours form dramatic living sculptures which instantly capture attention. They are an innovative cross between the Agave and a Manfreda, combining the best qualities of both. They're fast-growing, drought tolerant, low maintenance and harder than agave, plus they come in a fabulous array of colours and forms. In very mild coastal and city gardens, these tender succulents can be grown outside all year. That said, I prefer to transfer them into my back heated porch, to appreciate them through the winter months too.

My collection of agaves is over-wintered in a side alley, which has a purpose-built perspex roof over it! So, every spring it's a case of struggling to carry them from under cover, out into the sunshine, in the beach garden. The large one pictured is agave parviflora, which can be quite sharp on the leaf edges, so wearing thick gloves is usually a good option during the process.

