Christopher Lloyd Scholarship report – January

The New Year started with a fresh horizon of what is to come over the next few months. Initial checks and observations were taken on the seedlings in the Rhino Pen, with the realisation that they had only had one solid watering since they went in there way back when. It has also shown which plants are less suited to an autumn sowing, such as Clarkia and Nicotiana. Not to say that they have completely given up the ghost, just that they do like to grumble their ways through each day…Still, they are alive and just some of the more needy individuals in the frame. Those that do make it through shall produce big solid beasts and all the fuss will be way worth it. As the month has progressed we have carried on protecting the young plants from late night frosts with a good covering of hessian, along with monitoring watering carefully to ensure they aren't too wet or too dry…just right. Temperatures are rising though, growth is getting stronger, plants are getting bigger and our time is becoming more precious. Making sure to pot on systematically for those that need it, as and when.

Of a great pleasure has been the green woodwork with the chestnut, which was coppiced from the woodland. The mission: to make a new pear support to go up in the High Garden. With a keen eye, pencil, paper and tape measure, we set out to diagnose the frame and see which single pieces or whole frames where in need of a little TLC. After this we collected our wood, looking for the strongest, straightest/most attractive. These were then cleaned up by removing their bark with a draw blade. This is due to moisture being able to get under the bark as it deteriorates. Here it can harbour fungal growth and rot the wood. So, in removing it, we are extending the life of the posts. Our two vertical posts also had to be charred to just above the point at which they will go in to the ground. The burning of the wood must be done until the pole begins to crack across its surface. This is the sign that it is charred enough. The reason for doing so is that carbon decomposes very slowly, much as in the way of peat. Therefore, the mass in the ground essentially has a carboniferous coat that aids in extending the life of the posts. The pear support was assembled in-situ, trying to balance out the natural form of the post in relation to that of the pear tree. I have to say that the green woodwork is a real pleasure to do and highly gratifying. Previously the supports were raised to hide the growth of the vegetables in the High Garden, where as now, nothing is hidden and the supports, along with the pears, form an intrinsic part of the High Gardens aesthetic.

We have also been discussing new ideas for the High Garden, not that I would be giving any away now. But the process of how we could manage the area in a different style, with use of different plants, either new, unknown or recycled. Sometimes it can be stronger to change from the same or similar design, even if it works well. Its been done, so what next? Nature doesn't stop and is always adapting, so why shouldn't a design. Why hold a space static when it goes against the natural cycle to which it belongs. For me, design is the same and Great Dixter offers a brilliant opportunity to witness this. With this it is important for us to take in to consideration the shape, form and timing of plants. With plant choice being made in accordance with the plants abilities. We just work to accentuate these and the surrounding area in which they are viewed. With this in mind, we have

completed most of our winter clear through in the beds, just going through each area with a fine tooth come, cutting back, selective weeding, lifting any last plants that aren't suited to the design and of course tickling a little mulch through. We only add a little, as we don't want to inhibit the natural seed bank in the beds. If we lay the mulch on too think then we run the chance of supressing the seed bank and as a result will lead to less self sowers. These are essential to Great Dixters design. They tie all the other plants together. Aiming to create flow as you move through the garden as a viewer. Creating informality through complex management of self-sowers and mulching. Within this has been to better understand our use of the two types of mulch we have; composted bark – a fine product that is acidic in nature, suitable for the ericaceous among us, along with Hydrangeas and Phlox'. The mushroom compost – is used in all other cases. It is rich in fungi and has a good body to it meaning it is a great soil conditioner and microorganism encourager. It is also a waste product of the mushroom productive trade, so works out well for us to use.

Towards the end of the month we had the working weekend, which encouraged those in the horticultural industry to come to Great Dixter and join in with what we do for a couple of days. We mostly carried on with the work described above, along with building habitat piles. This was also a great experience to meet others in the industry to discuss what we are doing. It was also very beneficial to me in developing my leadership skills with a small team, answering questions and delegating as required.

After this the other students and I were allowed to join in on Fergus' succession planting lecture/study day. It was amazing to get to grips with the theory of how the bed design works at Great Dixter, along with seeing a years plan for plants, laid out on the floor in front of me in a practical demo. It taught me how to get an extra 4-5 months out of an area, through the use of winter structure, evergreen plants and layered bulb planting. It's an art in maximising your space. Of the most interest is the seasonal bulb & perennial layer which is added to where it wont cause any issue to other plants but accentuate the design of the space. It can also be done in such a way so that the maintenance is minimal.

It has been a great pleasure was to work down in the coppice woods with Ritch our woodsman. A native woodlands…mostly, that plays a key role in producing material that is used throughout the estate for firewood, structural repairs, plant structures, pea sticks and habitat piles/deer deterrent piles around the newly cut stools. These protective measures are essential in ensuring that the deer don't eat all the young new buds as the stool goes back into growth. Doing so can lead to the demise of the tree and over time would lead to a more barren landscape. The woodland is managed in a way so that areas are cut on rotation. Trees are planted close enough together so that they grow up and not out, resulting in nice straight boles. The management of a small woodland requires more management than a large as these tend to manage themselves more effectively over time with their broader regenerative power, of "natural coppicing" through weather or age. In a small situation such as ours, intervention is essential to keep rejuvenation going and as a result it aids in keeping the biodiversity high.

The learning literally never stops!!! I look forward to what tomorrow may bring.

Rob Leonard Flack.