

## Christopher Lloyd Scholarship report – March

To start off March, Ben and myself took on the task of threading Ladybird Poppies throughout the Barn Garden. These were planted in high numbers, over 400...probably closer to 500. So we watch this space in anticipation as the black and red showstoppers build up their reserves to delight us. Of interest in this planting is how the ladybird poppies grow in comparison to the Beth's poppy. The ladybirds produce a large mass of mounded leaves that can swamp other plants and then each with a tall stem and the flowers at the apex. The Beth's poppy on the other hand has a more delicate weaving habit that works its way up and through plantings and produces smaller, multi branched displays. Taking this into consideration, we will have to be mindful of the ladybirds in their display as they may overwhelm some plants. We also will have to be mindful that after the poppies have had their show, the foliage will begin to brown as the energy is moved into the seed production. At this point we will begin to remove the poppies and plant in whomever we have in line, or allow the surrounding plants to take their place. These little considerations are those that I have been keen to learn at Great Dixter. To understand a plants development and take into mind what we will do next. The poppies are planted in a high – low density so as to create negative space as well as positive space. The negative is just as important as the positive for it helps to rest the eye. If it was thick with ladybird poppies then it could be a bit traumatic on the eye in such an enclosed space. The eye should be able to move naturally through the garden, being carried across each plant onto the next. Also, noting on seed development, I was keen to learn that we don't have much of a poppy seed bank at Great Dixter due to the plants being taken out prior to dropping.

Ben and I also had the delight of lifting the huge *Eryngium pandanifolium* from the long boarder. We had to do in stages for its size would have easily defeated multiple digging forks. We left a few large clumps together then reassessed the healthiest looking one to return in its place. The original clump had become slightly too large for the space and although it was bold and attractive in colour, now was the time to split. We also found a huge piece of corrugated iron that had clearly been inserted horizontally many years ago to prevent the spread of some other plant. The stories say it was a *Houttuynia* from yesteryear. The *Eryngium* seemed all too happy to sit on top of this iron. All the other smaller pieces have been potted up and kept tight in the frames, whilst two larger clumps have been left, one to be sunk into the pond in the Sunk Garden, the other to be sunk into the horse pond. Naturally these plants dwell in damp ditches throughout Brazil, Argentina, New Zealand and Australia, so they should be right at home here and also add some additional layers to these habitats.

There has been further frame progress as the weather begins to warm, more and more hardy annuals have achieved the "planting out" status and fledged the nest. The few that still need protection could now be moved into on frame and kept close to aid their development. Now with the additional space the hardiest cuttings from the hot house can be potted on and moved into the free frames. Once again, keeping the atmosphere close whilst they get their roots down. This not only hardens them off but also creates a little more space in the hot house for the

more tender cuttings to be potted up and grown on with the added temperatures to aid their development. From there, as we move closer to April, the tender material will come out into the frames to harden off so that the really tender materials can go through the same process. Eventually all the material is either potted on or out in the garden. It works through a very logical conveyor belt system along with other annuals and perennials that are being sown, pricked out and potted on. This constant shift in the nursery is part of the heart within the plantings at Great Dixter. Material is moved in relation to the season, weather and the plants abilities. All in all, it means the garden is consistent in its ability to create diverse, imaginative, interesting spaces.

We had the delight of joining Fergus' lecture on *Designing with Plants*. This taught me about the importance of being individual. The best gardens truly are and these are founded on ideas from those who aren't afraid to experiment. Christopher Lloyd being one of those. Great Dixter continues to fall into this category. It is gardened by people who want to have fun and in doing so allow themselves to run with the abilities of each situation. We use design at Great Dixter as a means to soften the structure of the garden set out by Nathaniel Lloyd and Edwin Lutyens. We have to consider how the landscape speaks to us as gardeners in relation to the garden. In our case this is the wider estate, the woodlands, the meadows, the hedgerows...this all seeps into the garden but at the same time the garden seeps out into the wider estate. It is a marriage of the wilderness and the cultivation, where plants rub shoulders with one another. I understand more and more that I need to almost interrogate the plant. "Hey plant.... where would you like to grow, who would you like to grow with, who gives you excitement?" If I can figure these three questions out then I believe I am onto something progressive. If not then perhaps the answer is that the plant isn't suited, and I'm OK with that. But to get to that point I need to be inquisitive and learn how to push my own boundaries. Make those mistakes, ask those questions, and take on criticism. How else can I let myself grow if I don't put the same inquisitiveness onto myself that I put onto the plants? From here it is really a case of training myself on how to visualise the future of a space. Consider the leaf, as Christopher Lloyd would say "its there the longest, the flower is a bonus." Stop! Look! Analyse! Edit! See the excitement in what happens. If I can keep up with these concepts then I believe I will have really understood the design philosophy of Great Dixter, set out by Christopher Lloyd and developed by Fergus and the team.

Historically the Peacock Garden used to contain double rows of Lavender, but this gets tired easily and didn't fair too well on our claggy soils, giving a shorter, less impressive season as time went by. Christo decided to plant *Aster lateriflorus* var. *horizontalis*, a sub-shrub of a perennial. These all had to be lifted, the bed cleared from all but a few lucky plants that didn't get in our way, such as *Violas* & *Gladiolus*. The rows were lined out again with a slightly distressing mix of measuring tapes, canes, rope and questioning. A flash back to my GCSE maths class. Then large healthy clumps were re-set in the double row formation and self sowers stitched through. Eventually Beth's Poppy, *Papaver dubium* subsp. *lecoqii albiflorum* was planted throughout the Peacock Garden in the same high - low density as other plantings. With the design being narrow as you enter the space from the lower

steps and it funnelling out across the beds, mixing playfully with the *Digitalis* 'Excelsior Hybrids' & 'Suttons Apricot' throughout.

Fergus went through the planting gaps with us, looking at March sown options, April-May sown options for a June gap to also include cuttings and rhizome splits. As well as June/July sown seed for an August gap. The intensity of each gap is relative to how strong a planting precedes it. E.g. if there are a lot of spring sown *Amni majus* and *Salvia sclerea* var. *turkestanica* then the August gap can be difficult to fill as these plants will leave large gaps in the bed. Therefore considerations have to be taken to plant wisely, with the following months in mind.

We have had a complete delight in visiting Maurice Fosters to take a class on grafting, cutting and seed sowing with himself, Chris Lane and Peter Schoter. This also included a tour of his arboretum. I must say, what a commitment this man has to shrubs and trees. A true collector and a collection he holds indeed. Making it very clear that these specimens are rare and as gardeners it is up to us to keep them around due to commercial nurseries not having any intention to grow such niche specimens. We, as gardeners are the next step to preservation of collections. Following this we went to Elizabeth Strangmans to have a tour of her *Helleborus* collection. Yet again, a super star in the propagation, hybridization and design of these lovely little spring wonders among others. Lastly on the tours for this month was to visit Munstead Woods, Gertrude Jekyll' creative enterprise. The architecture designed by an up and coming Edwin Lutyens at the age of 21. The garden had been lost but has been back on the way to full recovery with the expertise of the team. It was lovely to make the connection from Dixter to Munstead Woods, knowing that Christo was introduced to Gertrude as a young boy and then that later on Edwin would go on to create the structure of Great Dixter, to then be fuelled by the influence of Gertrude Jekyll in the hands of Christopher Lloyd. If that isn't the most joyous of creative stories then I don't know what is.

I'll end this month on the redesign of the pot display that Madelaine and I took part in. We were given the task of the Walled Garden and allowed to use anything at our disposal to create something inviting, interesting and show stopping. I think ours has developed better with time and overall stand strongly against the other pot displays. My lessons from this process are that the plants going in should give strong "wow factor" in leaf or structure from the get go. Any further development will be a bonus to the final outcome. Our design involved an arching conifer that allowed you to view through the display to the *Luma apiculata* in the bed behind. This was welcomed with budding willows, *Amelanchier*, *Pinus* and many many pots of bulbs, of which the foliage helped to tie the design together, but are also aiding in the gradual development of the display as they all come into flower. Overall it lacked instant pleasure in terms of its *pzaz!*...but offered intrigue in its structure. Needless to say there is plenty of room for development in these displays and I have learnt some valid lessons in setting one out.

Rob Leonard Flack.