

Christopher Lloyd Scholarship report – October

Well, the second month has been as much of a blast as the first. A continuing theme of enthusiastic energy has become clear and with it a great amount of many tasks to keep each day as interesting and integral as the last. With the continuation of propagation, we have been planning and prepping for the spring show. Ensuring that our hardy annuals are sown, cold frames cleared... ready to go and the germinating seed then grown on until they can be pricked out and set into the prepared frames. Not only has the further development of my propagation skills been highly valuable, but also it has taught me how to finess the process...mostly by making mistakes, but what else are they good for than to teach. Poor germination rates have been an issue as well as densely germinating seeds. The main errors here seem so simple when I write them out but clearly not simple enough for me to grasp without an error. These included: over-sieving of compost, irregular compost levels and sowing seed too densely. Both of which lead to either an underwhelming seed pot or an overexcited one where seedlings began to compete with each other for resources, eventually causing leggy seedling that could be weaker in the long run. Pricking out has been another great joy but has come with a good learning curve that has allowed me to gain consistency in my propagation skills and meant that the seedlings are more stable as a result. Still, some are trickier than others and a keen eye, steady hand and maybe some tweezers have helped me along the way. From here has been the management and observation of the cold frames. Learning how to look out for issues such as pest damage, watering levels, damping off or....miscellaneous. But these are all the reason why we keep a backup of seedlings in their seed pot, to fill their gap. Management of the frames is mainly carried out through ventilation, aiming to keep the atmosphere close whilst the new seedlings have gone in so that they can develop roots and then to gradually allow air in to keep their temperature down so that they don't go into active growth. Allowing them to sit static over the winter, with a good root zone and then be ready to go out in the garden in spring. The work we put in now means that we will be way ahead when the spring rolls around and can focus on other tasks in the garden. This logistical planning is really a huge benefit to my learning, allowing me to better grasp how to make the most of a gardens time to give the best performance in the future. There has also been plenty of potting on with the material from earlier in the season or last year that is due a boost in space and nutrients. Then we are onto compost, the potting mixes; No1, 2 & 3 along with "old soil mix" and cutting compost. Its been a real interest of mine to build a foundation on these differing ratios so that I can be more successful in producing plants from the ground up. I feel quite confident now in these, along with their uses, pros and cons. Crucial in this process was really getting a feel for these mediums, learning when one is too fluffy, gritty and so forth.

We have been fortunate enough to take three trips out to Woolbeding in Midhurst to aid in the development of the "Silk Route" garden. Here we have been planting bulbs throughout the varied rocky terrain; Istanbul, Olympus Range, Black Sea, Anatolia, Persia, Zagros Mountains, Central Asia, Himalayas and the Tian Shan Range. The plantings are naturalised in a variation of clumps, clusters, strips and randomised throws. "Plant it where it lies, avoid interfering with what the internal

voice tells you”...Otherwise the structured gardener in me finds it all too easy to move a bulb here or there and before you know it the planting is all too structured. It’s been a good lesson in understanding how nature is chaotic and unstructured (in ways), so formality is one notion to leave at the door. Not only has the overall process been delightful, but also there have been lots of interesting little tricks in how to plant these graceful little storage organs, to ensure they make it through the winter and give the best show.

We have had the last main goes at the hedging and are now practically finished, just for a few last tweaks here and there and it’ll be job done for the year. Still after each cut, I can go back and re-assess my work, noticing areas that have either been missed, rushed or could be improved in some way. It’s taught me to observe more and above all, take my time. I’ve tackled some much larger pieces, that being the north hedge in the Vietnam section of the garden. I don’t think I’d appreciated its size and form properly until I cut it. Being on a decline, the rear of it is only two thirds of the other side, which falls in a really dramatic wave. It’s real treat to cut and of great sculptural structure.

Andrew, the American scholar, and myself took a day at the end of October to walk round the garden and collect any flowers and foliage that was still giving good interest. There was quite a collection on offer and really showed how much is still singing as we enter our closing week. All the flowers, leaves, fruits and seed heads were laid out on white sheets initially in colour groupings. Specimens were then swapped to see how the space changed and the colours complemented, or didn’t complement one another. Overall it was fascinating to see such variety and the broad range of colour available. On top of this was the chance to have a little play with the colour palate and see what worked and didn’t. A great little experiment in the abilities of the garden and one we shall do again in due course.

Included in the last month has been the “Bulb Symposium” which was a great opportunity for Fergus to go over the dynamic use of bulbs at Great Dixter. Involved in this was bedding pocket design, integration of bulbs into a boarder, bulb planting into a meadow and using bulbs in pots. The design element within the beds and boarders has run a very methodical process which, since completing, we have used multiple times to tackle other areas of the garden. Its definitely the most logical and concise process to tackling a bed that I have come across, as well as being one that I shall go on to use in the future. It’s all about creating paths through the bed, working out where your space is, which plants need moving, dividing or questioning as to their ability to withstand the winter. After this is the addition of seasonal bedding plants and in this case, tulips. So far I have aided in the development of multiple beds in the Barn Garden, Rose Garden Hovel and the Long Boarder. Having seen the deconstruction of the beds has allowed me to see how these dynamic spaces are developed. It “clicks”. There is a very intimate, integral, layered design throughout and this deconstruction is crucial. In particular to this is the way that after clearing through the beds and tying up plants, we lay out canes around the permanent groups. This creates valleys where we can plant our bulbs and notice space for re-arrangement. It’s the additional areas of play that are used to stitch the groups together with annuals and bulbs. I really look forward to this process again but more so in seeing these areas come

to fruition and then working them later in the year once everything has come back into active growth.

I still can't believe that it has only been two months since I began my journey at Great Dixter. So much has happened and I feel I have learnt so much. Yet, the journey is so young, with plenty more to go. Each day that goes past I have a better understanding of the historic techniques to run a place such as Great Dixter and also how to logistically plan and think about a space in such a way so as to make its active season blossom. There is a lot of reflecting for me to do and I don't expect that to ever stop. It will be with great delight that I will look back on this time and these reports to aid in my growth and development.

Rob Leonard Flack.