



*View from a ladder across the Topiary Lawn to the main house. Hedges have been cut along the perimeter, but the topiary pieces still need work. A newly mulched circle marks the former location of a *Phyllostachys nigra* 'Boryana' bamboo which flowered and died this summer.*

The Autumn Plant Fair

October has marked the change in seasons at Great Dixter, with the last of the warm, dry days changing over to cool nights and frequent rains, though temperatures have remained mostly above 40° F at night. With the season's turn also comes the end of the garden's public opening times, as we close for the winter months until reopening in the early spring. October began with the Great Dixter Autumn Plant Fair, an exciting and face-paced weekend which hosted nurseries and plantspeople from across the UK for two wonderfully dry, warm days. A particular highlight of the Fair are the short talks given by nurseries on a variety of different plant interests; Derry Watkins of Special Plants Nursery gave a great talk on her favorite umbellifers in the family *Apiaceae*. Kevin Hughes of Cally Gardens in Scotland gave an excellent talk on biodiversity and a style of 'grass gardening' which uses herbaceous perennials intermixed in a dynamic meadow system.



Fergus and team preparing the locally sourced venison for the Saturday pit-roast dinner.



A great view of the Peacock Garden enjoyed on a ladder used for cutting the high hedges.

Hedge Cutting

Hedges have been a major focus of the work at Dixter this month. On good, dry days we have five-person teams making use of the favorable weather by cutting hedges all day. Dixter's yew hedges are comprised of hundreds of seedlings, each with their own growth habit, branching pattern, texture, and density. North-facing sections of hedge are much more open than their dense South-facing counterparts, and so much of the work in hedge-cutting is responding thoughtfully to each section's challenges.

Technique is an important aspect of cutting hedges. One useful method for shaping the hedge evenly is to look down the line of the hedge by lying your cheek on it, giving you a good profile view of a section. This way you can keep track of any abnormal bulges in the hedge that need to be corrected and maintain the hedge's batter (the slope angle). It is also important to be mindful of what part of the hedge-cutter blade you use and where it makes contact with the hedge surface. Pushing the body of the hedge cutter snug against or into the hedge, you cut with the bottom half of the blade. This helps prevent accidental gouging of the hedge with the hedge-cutter tip. The way that corners and edges are treated are particularly important to the overall look, since these edges create the shadows and interplay of light which give the hedges their character. Counterintuitively, to produce crisp edges you 'blunt' the edge by angling the blade perpendicular to the line of the ridge and using a series of short down strokes to cut off feathery tips that are left behind from cutting each side of the hedge.

A great bonus of working on the hedges are the views of the garden which you get from up on the tripod ladders. We use ladders to reach the tops of high towers and buttresses that need to be cut. From these high angles you gain interesting new views of the garden, with a much clearer view of the structure and layout of the beds. My favorite ladder-view so far has been of the Peacock Garden looking across the Kitchen Drive, where the change in elevation creates an interesting new perspective!

Nice sharp corner edges created with the blunting technique make the shadows pop in the Peacock Garden.



Seed Sowing

This time of year, we're busy sowing seeds of hardy annuals and biennials for next year's bedding displays. Autumn sowing is an important way to take pressure off of the work in springtime, when we're busy with the rush of other duties at the beginning of the season. By sowing later, at the end of October, we're banking on milder conditions persisting through the winter for the seedlings to grow on slowly. If the season allows, we can then avoid potting on the seedlings for a second time after pricking them out, which saves us from double-handling the bedding material, which increases the time and cost to produce plants. If growth remains slow and consistent, we can plant them out straight from plug trays in the spring. We've been working to protect the seeds from rodents, which will eat larger seeds and especially those in the families *Fabaceae*, *Apiaceae*, and *Malvaceae*. Installing box frames that have been wrapped in hardware cloth provides a good physical deterrent.

I am particularly looking forward to seeing Beth's Poppy, *Papaver dubium* subsp. *lecoqii* 'Albiflorum', blooming in the Peacock Garden next year. I love poppies, particularly the orange-flowered species from the Mediterranean, such as *Papaver atlanticum*, though I've only ever direct sown them in my garden at home. It's interesting working with annuals since the turnaround from germination to pricking out is much quicker than with perennials, which may sit in their original pots as seedlings for some time. The poppies resent root disturbance and so they are pricked out extremely quickly after germination when they're still quite small.

Seed frames protect the seedlings and provide ideal conditions for germination even while the temperature drops. As the days get shorter, we often emerge from the Long Shed at dusk after a day of sowing and pricking out seedlings.



Small Divisions and Specialty Splits

Each scholar at Great Dixter has been given a project to work on during our time in the garden. My focus is specialty propagation, with my project involving making and looking after small divisions and material created by more unusual propagation methods. One group I have been focusing on splitting are the North American asters in the genus *Symphyotrichum*. These asters often are clump-forming and produce basal shoots, though some also can increase by stolons. Plants can be split down into small, simple divisions: frequently a single aster clump may provide 15 to 30 divisions that can be created just by carefully feeling for natural breaks and slowly teasing the stems apart. These simple divisions can be split down further into one and two-eye splits, taking sections of shoots or dormant buds with some roots attached and potting them into small pots or cell trays. The main stems can also be split down the middle to produce split-stem divisions. We split down two clumps of *Symphyotrichum lateriflorum* 'Dixter's Chloe', a seedling of *S. lateriflorum* 'Chloe' with darker coloration found at Great Dixter, into 150 basal cuttings and 50 small divisions. That's a lot of plants from just two clumps!



A small two-eye aster split to be potted up after trimming the roots down to size.

Plants of Interest

One grass that is looking fantastic in the garden is *Molina caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* “Windspiel”, which is located at one corner of the Orchard Garden right before passing through the hedge to the Long Border. This grass has wonderful yellow coloring in the fall as it turns over, here paired with the nice apple green leaves of *Boehmeria cylindrica*.

I’ve also really been enjoying the *Fatsia japonica* cf. ‘Spider’s Web’ blooming in the subtropical garden, which illuminates in a spooky glow at night with a flashlight. I am normally not taken by variegated plants, but the wonderful cobwebby venation of this *Fatsia* is really stunning.



Fatsia japonica cf. ‘Spider’s Web’.



Molina caerulea subsp. *arundinacea* “Windspiel”

A last-minute trip to Prospect Cottage in Dungeness: we caught the light at the right time!





Photos from the Autumn Plant Fair (clockwise from left): a table display from Special Plants Nursery; hay bales set up for the fair; open hours with a rush of attendees in the morning; after-fair venison cookout in the lower field.

