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New year, new us. There are big changes on the horizon for us to make across the garden, bringing joy, clarity and interest to us and hopefully the visitors. The gear change is obvious as we head towards opening. We are minding the seedlings, making sure they don't get too far ahead of us, just trying to slow them down or keep them static so as to buy us some time to get on with other work. Within this we have lifted the entire *Iris* 'Gerald Darby' from the Sunken Garden pond as the core has become fairly inactive. After a good dose of chopping and lopping the mass fully revealed itself. A couple of healthy clumps were sunk back into place, held within a redbrick framework. Should the pond flood, as it has the tendency to do now and again, then these new little islands may require some stakes to hold them in place whilst they get rooted. The rest of the stock, to which there is plenty, all made its way down to the nursery where it was split into 1ltr' for the nursery and the rest was split down to single growing points to grow on, eventually becoming saleable stock or going elsewhere in the garden. I still find it surprising how many plants we can get out of "a few bits".

Our compost is delivered locally from Hawkhurst. We had a visit this month. It is the bi-product of an anaerobic digester where by, organic mass is fed into a tank which heats it up and churns it, essentially like a giant cows belly. This then gets fed into three more tanks, which break it down further and partially feed some back into the other tanks to keep the bacteria moving through the process. Eventually the forth tank fills up with methane, which goes on to power a generator, which then creates electricity that is fed into the grid. Currently they have the capacity to fuel 15,000 homes' electricity. Within this forth tank is a nutrient rich liquid that is used by the farmer to feed the crops he uses to feed the machine. With all of this is the digested waste, which is formed of the used material that initially went in, fully broken down and rich in macro and micronutrients. The end product is fairly consistent, but the "mechanical cows bellies" require a specific balanced diet, as we do, to ensure that all the correct bacteria, nutrients and reactions are taking place inside. Obviously, no year is the same with weather being highly variable so the crops chosen are varied to cover any changes that the year's weather may throw the digesters way. One of which is *Silphium perfoliatum* that we use in the garden ornamentally. It's a perennial plant and fairly robust, being able to deal with summer droughts. They also take on waste from pack houses where fruit and vegetables are "graded out" from sellable stock. It gave me a lot of hope to know that these systems are in place and that actually there is an alternative to fossil fuels being used. Yet most of all, there is a bi-product that we can use on the garden.

In this second year of training I am seeing how Fergus and the team are trying to fine-tune my learning, taking me through more detailed tasks of design and development. Of this month was a small under-planting that required some amendments. It sits about half way down on the east arm of the high garden, just passed the oriental poppies and under a beautifully scented *Philadelphus mexicanus* but opposite a substantial ball of tree ivy. Needless to say it is a shady

spot deeper in the season that is noted by the proliferation of *Geranium pratense* that fringes the north side of the bed. For me, it needed vibrancy and small groupings of plants that will hold the space in the early season, but not get shaded out when summer really gets underway. Its vibrancy came from *Carex oshimensis* 'Everillo', a golden yellow sedge that I haven't seen in the garden and one that I believe will really brighten up the spot as well as bouncing off the golden privet behind it. From here, it was to find partners for the sedge, making sure that they were substantial, able to deal with the conditions and pair well with the surroundings. There was a lot of back and forth, many pitches, with explanations given as to why not and the ability to pursue ideas what I believed would work, until I realised they wouldn't. I found it one of the most challenging areas of planting that I've done, as there were many variables that made it quite tricky to balance. It reminded me of doing the pot displays all over again, but this time, instead of having a blank canvas, I had a skeleton structure to work with. Each plant had to stand its ground and be given the space to do so. It's so easy to sit plants among each other, thinking "yes this and this and this.....the distance looks good, they look good now". But in reality, they need space, normally a lot more than you may think. I had to do a lot of moving about of the plants and stepping back, until I found a view that I was happy with but also made sense. I planted *Hechera* 'Leuchtkafer', *Pulmonaria* 'Blue Ensign', *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Alexanders Great', *Epimedium pubescens* 'Shaanxi Forms' and *Mitellia breweri*. Some plants I knew, some I didn't, others which the nursery sell and its great to make that connection with them, getting these varieties out in the garden to see how they react. It's a real challenge to see plants in the future, see there shape, colour, reactions and form, but these lessons are helping me get to a place that makes sense and I can look back at them and see if these decisions work or if they didn't, why not.

The phlox' this year didn't really perform, in my opinion. I can't really say I even remember them that much or felt wowed by them. Later to find that they did actually had a bad year based on multiple factors; pigeon attacks, weather and competition... Three factors that would knock back most plants if given in the correct dosage. In the Peacock Garden the Phlox Bed is a slightly off-square space with a large pear tree sitting just off centre. Its main purpose is to act as a stock bed with ornamental value in tandem. The lines become a little blurred as invasive weeds, particularly *Helianthus angustifolius* has managed to make its presence prominently know. Now, this isn't a bad plant, not by any measure, quite the contrary really. Its tall, late season, dances through the beds, doesn't require staking and is vibrant yellow. It's a winner really. But! It runs, like mad, and not only that, it runs, puts up a flowering shoot, which dies, but by that point a new rhizomatous root has already begun its journey off to the next space. As the old flowering shoot dies, it dies back to the end of the new rhizome and means that all the flowering shoots that you had last year, now have new rhizomes and are detached from the mother plant, but heading off in a different direction. And of course, they branch! SO I would say it is HIGHLY successful at doing what it does. One thing Phlox' don't like though is competition, to which these are, along with various other factors, such as self sowers, grasses, *Thalictrum*', *Lilium*', hardy annuals and anything else we decide to throw at it really. Alas, the Phlox's aren't doing so well and we have many issues to manage

before they may do. But also, is a whole bed necessary? Can the stock be managed in smaller spaces where there is more control? Decisions made, the Phlox' no longer live in that bed, apart from the strong groups that seem un-phased by their surroundings, they can stay. Instead of trying to constantly eradicate a problematic issue, why not use it as an opportunity to experiment with plant interactions and management styles. The whole area is surrounded by pavement, which on the other side is all fairly heavily planted and hopefully won't get too out of control, should it then it'd still make for an interesting discussion. Drum roll.....we have decided to create an invasive/runners bed. Just typing that brings the sound of screeeeeching cars to mind but I'm sure it's going to be great fun and with it, some lessons learned as to the limitations of plants. We have the ability to play with the garden in this way, so why not. So along with *Helianthus angustifolius* comes; *Macleya microcarpa*, *Cichorium intybus*, *Eomecon chionantha*, *Euphorbia pseudovirgata*, *Salix udensis* 'Golden Sunshine', *Salix balfourii*, *Salix exigua*, *Allium ampeloprasum*, *Allium* 'Summer Drummer'. The alliums aren't necessarily invasive or runners but they do put out big strap-like leaves, meaning they offer competition upfront. It's going to be hugely interesting to see what comes up in this space and how they all interact with each other. I would also like to see *Romneya coulteri* in there as well. A decent, tall runner that may just add a little more chaos to the situation. In terms of management, we hope to just do it with one big cut, ideally by mower...but there is plenty of time before those sort of decisions are finalised.

Ernie, one of the Christopher Lloyd Scholars this year, and I are looking after nursery stock propagation and plants for the garden. Meaning that we are overseeing any incoming stock, managing numbers and seeing what the nursery needs in relation to their sales, including us holding additional number back so they have excess should they need it. The past month has involved a lot of splitting and assessing of stock, from the Iris in the Sunken Garden, to the Phlox of importance in the peacock garden, to the *Miscanthus giganteus* in the barn garden. Everything that gets lifted has a purpose, not just in its status as a plant in the garden, but as stock and how it has to be managed into a rotating puzzle for sale in the nursery. At this point it becomes a lesson to us in how to create that stock and how to manage those numbers and the plants. In time giving the nursery additional stock that they are unable to prop, produce or maintain themselves. It's a closed system and one that makes the joys of working here all more joyous.

Lastly on this month' big changes/developments is the Orchard Garden. An area that hasn't really had any identity as the lines have been blurred through smaller plantings that have accent plants placed through them and self sowers adjoining the seams. The brief we decided was to make all groups bigger in the upper and lower orchard garden. Moving away from the lighter, wilder look that has previously taken the area, we increased all groups already present as well as adding new, larger groups where the 'dead zones' sat. With some shuffling around these 'dead zones' soon large spaces became that could be colonised by larger plantings of perennials. The space is to be a mid summer display and having seen this and other areas I now accept that it is ok to have a space that has "a time". The principles to this planting were very similar to the planting

under the *Philadelphus mexicanus*. Big, bold, significant! Our final decisions were based on the surrounding *Geranium psilostemon* (Magenta), *G.* 'Orion' (Blue), *Achillea* 'Silver Spray' (White), *Helenium* 'Zimbelstern' (Yellow) and *Nepeta* 'Amelia' ("dirty pink"). To this we added (in memory as we are waiting for the stock to develop further) *Campanula lateriflorus* 'Pritchards Variety' (Purple), *Achillea* 'Terrocota' (Orange), *Monarda* 'Cambridge Scarlet' (Rosy-red). This all then has *Lythrum virgatum* 'Rosy Gem' (magenta, tall spikes) and *Verbascum olympicum* (Sulphur yellow, tall spikes) dotted through the whole display in high-low density. Overall, it ties a whole range of colours together, with each (hopefully) reacting off the other. The curve ball in there is the *Nepeta* as its pink is subdued and not as prominent as the surrounding colours, but the thought is that its colours will be fully expressed with the *Monarda* sat by its side, showing the importance of playing with opposing and contrasting plants of the colour spectrum, (Hopefully!!!).

Rob Leonard Flack.