

## Rick Mather David Scrase Christopher Lloyd Scholar March 2024

I cannot believe that I'm already at the rear end of March. The garden is beginning to expand; pulsating with the floral displays as it very quickly reaches a long-term crescendo before plateauing throughout the remaining seasons. It seems to happen so quickly. Those first few signs of spring that appear in the snowdrops, crocus and winter flowering shrubs all transition subtly to further foliage and flowering combinations across the whole estate. There is so much that has gone in/goes into each area and has done for many years, that each space has naturally evolved with each passing season to be the better part of its former self. At least, this is always the aim, sometimes external circumstances have a part to play and lead to less than ideal situations, but this only adds to the challenge and our duty in being reactive, responsive gardeners. There are never really any guarantees through the seasons as we are so dependant on the weather and its mood, only too hopeful that we don't get drowned, blown to pieces or fried. Either way, its still fun and its always a learning curve.

We have had the absolute pleasure of welcoming Hiroshi Ozawa back to the garden for the forth time. He turned to horticulture many moons ago and takes great pleasure in coming to Great Dixter to work and learn with us. My first day with him was inside the crown of the giant (supposedly dwarf) conifer in the centre of the high garden, *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Ellwood's Gold'. This was originally gifted to Christopher Lloyd by one of his former students, who later went on to teach Fergus Garrett. It was apparently a dwarf variety.... or perhaps a long running joke. Although, the cutting material of conifers can be quite temperamental and each plant can vary depending on the type of material taken and weather or not it has reverted or mutated. Needless to say, it's fairly large nowadays and has been beaten by many a southwesterly wind, along with the weight of it gradually pulling it open. Hiroshi and I were sent up to further pull it in on itself, so that it doesn't spill out any further. From that first moment, I knew that Hiroshi was a hard worker, seeing him in his special tabi climbing shoes, with a strong mind set and ability to work rope. He taught me a few knots and in no time at all was right at the top of the tree, bringing the crown in together. Branches were supported to those on the opposite side of the tree as well as the central leaders. Strap ratchets aided the tightening of the rope along with short lengths of hose to support around the branches so that they don't cut in. I keep looking up at it now as it moves as one in the wind, a brief look inside looks like the internal peak of a giant circus tent.

We've been planting Beth's Poppy out through the kitchen drive, so that it spills out through the vistas along the path and up onto the walls. The perk of *Papaver dubium* subsp. *lecoqii* 'Albiflorum', (aka Beths Poppy, or Christos poppy, depending on which side of the Thames you're on.) is that its rosette is small and low. In comparison to some of the other poppies we use, like the ladybird poppy, which has larger, rounded mounds of foliage. Beth's poppy also, has a dainty, more elegant stem and flower, meaning it dances through plants instead of squeezing them out. For an elegant poppy that adds without subtracting, this one is a clear winner... although the persistent wet that has been hanging over our landscape this spring has led to a rise in molluscs which in turn has led to re-planting of the poppies. Luckily this is why we prepare more than we need. It's all so unpredictable!

We are really in to the final sweep of the garden before opening. That means, final cutbacks, weeding, planting, pruning and so forth. It's like setting the tablecloth, cutlery

and glassware in a fine restaurant. We still have a traditional lined-out stock bed in the high garden which, due to the *Paeonia mlokosewitschii* (aka Molly the Witch) we call the Molly the Witch bed. It's home to various grasses, *Geraniums*, *Asters*, *Roses* and much more. It's a great space for us to line out material that we are specifically trying to bulk up for the nursery or ourselves. To clear through this sort of area is a great exercise in identifying wildflowers as we aim to make deliberate space between the rows, we can pull from a palate of "weeds", leaving those that still hold some charm and character. With this we have also run *Myosotis* through the rows, not only aiming to boost the display as you enter the High Garden from the south steps, but also creating an area that we can use to harvest *Myosotis* from next year...providing we get the summer rain required to encourage the seed to germinate. As the peony has begun to leaf out, so has the golden comfrey that sits behind it, highlighting the space and accented by pale blue of forget me not's.

Looking through the plants in the Rhino Pen (an area in the nursery, filled with frames where we carry out our propagation), it is clear to see which are stable for a little longer and those which are beginning to push. This helps to identify the material for the bedding pockets or stitching through the beds. Plants such as *Silene*, *Orlaya* & *Campanula* are able to hold for several more weeks before we need to consider planting them out, meaning that they are better suited to those areas that will be going over first. Those plants that are not stable, such as poppies, must be planted out asap otherwise they will spoil. Seeing those necks stretch on the plants encourages me to think about those next steps in the beds. How long will those plants hold before they bolt? How will we replace the bedding pockets? Which material will we eat into? Other plants such as *Salvia sclarea turkestanica* flowers mid season, finishing in August. It's a difficult gap to fill and even trickier to get a plant to establish well with so little time left on the clock. It does then beg the question of the practicality of using such plants in high demand places. Do the plants abilities balance out the difficulties in the future...or is it worth trying to establish those plants in a different way that adds accents to displays and features in the garden without the trouble of filling a gap. Last year I had the fortunate experience of seeing *Salvia sclarea turkestanica* in the wild, where it grew atop a small dusty hill, only really competed with Fabaceae and Brassicaceae that could handle the low nutrient soils and minimal competition. In the garden, the best expression I saw of the *Salvia* was in a semi-nutritious crack in the pavement in the Topiary Lawn. it was not anywhere near as large as that in Turkey and so it does make me question if these sort of tricky/horticulturally exciting plants are better suited to a space that is devoid of the gardeners desire to feed and improve. All the plants are valid, as are all the spaces available. Perhaps, rough, nutrient deficient areas such as outside the white barn and great barn are better suited to this sort of plant.

Last year we acquired a large sum of *Tulipa sprengeri* seed, a species that has been extinct in the wild for over 125 years due to overharvesting in its native range in Turkey. It exists now through gardens and the commercial trade, with efforts being made to re-establish it to its former beauty. A large proportion of the seed was sown in seed trays with grit or crushed terracotta bricks in the mix. On assessing the seedlings this year, it appears that those with the crushed brick in their mix have grown twice the size of its counter part. Sowing in the seed trays has also given us the ability to watch the bulb formation. The seeds first send out their radicle, pushing it as far down as it can go, meanwhile sending out the cotyledon. Once the root is as far down as it can go, it begins to form its bulb. A lot of the seedlings have begun forming their bulb outside of the seed tray, which does question the use of such a shallow tray. Several 1 litre pots were also sown and in these the roots had extended the majority of the pot with bulbils forming way at the base. The difference in depth is 5cm - 15 cm, showing the capability of these

plants to germinate in rocky outcrops and force their way down before forming a bulb that is now well out of harms way. It's important for us to observe these changes to work out the plants abilities and how we can best aid them in progression.

Gardeners can't help talking about the weather, particularly with so much riding on it. Mostly we discuss it in reference to the future, but this spring has been fairly testing with the relentless rain. Following this, the season has jumped through the thermostat and fallen again rapidly, mostly to more rain and tremendous winds. The effect that we have noticed of this on the garden is the Crocus and Snowdrop displays. They've been quick! Much quicker than last year, where I admired *Galanthus* 'Hippolyta' for many days before its quaint little double flower began to senesce. This year though, I felt as if I had blinked for too long. No quicker had I acknowledge that they were up, had they began to turn, along with the Crocus. I know that in the United States, the bulb season is very short on account of a prolonged cold spell and then a sudden jump in temperature. Perhaps this is what happened to us, where we are normally more used to a slow rise in Celsius. We also didn't really get a cold spell. We had a few days here and there but mostly just rain from as far back as I can remember. I also wonder if that more drastic rise in temperature caused pollinators to kick-start their lifecycles sooner, in turn causing a mass feed across the garden, which would naturally be more gradual. The bulbs are a great early food source for pollinators and it makes sense to me that this could also have been utilized quickly. As well as this, prolonged wet and quick rising temperatures has caused a mass germination across the garden, particularly of *Smyrniium perfoliatum*, an acid green/sulphur yellow umbel. It brings a much needed colour palate to the garden when the tulips begin to dip. It is however, germinating quite readily though the beds and boarders, raising eyebrows as to how the surrounding plants will cope and the ability for other self-sowers to get their elbows in. The "constant careful edit" is on the perimeters and it won't be long before we are meticulously running our hands through the plantings to ensure a balance is in place.

As we reach into the depths of spring, we are beginning to focus on those upcoming changes in the beds and boarders, particularly the bedding pockets. We are focusing on how much time we have in each area, who's going to go over first and which material we have up our sleeves to make those changes. For example, *Cannas* will be planted out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of June, from stock that will be potted up and grown on from mid April. Whereas any displays that are going over in the end of May can be filled with Autumn sown annuals that have the ability to lie static through the start of spring; e.g. *Silene*, *Tolpis*, *Amni* and *Viscaria*. Unlike the poppies which need to be planted out in March and no later or they will spoil. As well as this, summer displays can be achieved through sowing annuals in spring, but these will likely finish in August, and those gaps are particularly tricky to fill. Therefore a spring-sown safety net of *Clarkia*, *Calendula*, *Tagates*, *Cosmos* and *Ageratum* can be used to plug June gaps. May gaps can be filled with potted cuttings from the glasshouse and spring sown annuals; e.g. *Salvia*, *Plectranthus*, *Orlaya*, *Calendula*, *Centaurea*, *Nigella*, *Amni*, and *Papaver* (They will be shorter than an autumn sowing but fill a gap later in the season). The August gap generally relies on North American plants such as *Aster*, *Chrysanthemum*, *Eupatorium* and *Helianthus*, which will need to be prepared from splits or basal cuttings (for all) in the autumn or seed (*Helianthus*) in the spring.

To end this month, Talitha and Will assembled the pot display in the Blue Garden with myself as a guide and aid. It's one of my favourite tasks in the garden and totally different from other areas of design in the boarders. We have prepared a large quantity of pots with various bulbs. When making the displays, I like to have several points that hold the space, such as shrubs, conifers or other slow growing structural elements.

Following that I add groups of plants for large impact and then finish with accents or plants of interest. With the bulb season pot displays I do wonder if this is necessary. Would it be better to throw all the bulb pots together and let them stand the ground as a group? Could additional non-bulb material dilute or weaken the display? It could be an easy option to fill the space with bulb pots, all labelled and in similar style with their foliage, they could be grouped easily with swift thoughtlessness. I do much prefer the other option though, to include bulbs, shrubs, trees, perennials, etc. It's a garden canvas and pots are the medium. I taught Talitha and Will the way I learnt it last year...by trialling, coming to realisations, re-shuffling and asking for harsh criticism. Build the permanent structure then add the moving elements around that, followed by choice plants...but not insignificant plants, it must all be substantial. I get a lot of joy out of teaching the students, having been in their shoes just a year ago. Seeing how they assess the space, raising questions and combating the logistics. The end result is a strong display. They did a great job, tying it all together, looking at it from all angles and considering the strengths and weaknesses. As the month has gone on it has exploded in a mass of colour and scents, adding additional layers onto an already vibrant display.

Rob Leonard Flack.