July 2024 Report
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Naciim in the Orchard Garden stock beds, working his way through some tight spaces to plant Phlox 'David's Lavender' in a hole which we made in the center.

July Work

By the time we reach July, Dixter has been in full bloom for three months. Each month has a different display, with the tulip moment in April flowing into the poppy moment in May and June. Each transition between displays are carried through by umbellifers, with cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris)* first and parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*) second. Combined with a cool season, many plants have held on to their flowers for much longer than they would in a hot year, so we've had more flexibility to play with planting pockets in successive layers, often returning to the same border two or three times over the course of a few weeks. We do this to try and lessen any crashes in the borders with big groups finishing flowering. Now, with the bulk of the meadow flowers finished blooming and the grasses turning brown, the whole garden in July needs some refresh work to get the edges sharp again. Though we've done well to avoid any major gaps in the beds, there are areas where multiple annual or perennial groups go over at the same time.We also received a few days of high winds and rains, which makes it much more urgent to stay on top of staking and editing. Because our focus has mostly been on planting for the past two months, we move our attention back to more maintenance, creating more definition and clarity in the borders by removing dead stems and brown leaves.

Snapdragons in the solar bedding after a weekend of high wind and rain.

While we have a lot of new plantings which need a few weeks to fill out and cover the hole that we opened up in the border by planting, there are areas of the garden with a strong midsummer perennial layer that turns on in July and makes a big impact. In the Orchard Garden, we have a planting of *Anthemis* 'Wargrave's Variety' and *Achillea* 'Terracotta' with *Lythrum salicornia* and *Verbascum* 'Christo's Yellow Lightening' dotted through to the back of the bed, where giant cardoons (*Cynara cardunculus)* bloom with their heavy purple thistle heads. We intentionally went with big, bold groupings here with a clarity of color to make a big statement at this time of year. This way, we create a strong floral display on par with a bedding pocket at a time of year where we don't have a ton of bedding with that kind of strength.

Orchard Garden blooming with strong architectural plants providing good impact. The front of this bed was changed soon after this photo was taken, with the small grouping of phlox at the front being bulked up with a different cultivar, and Helenium 'Moerheim Beauty' placed in a hole at the back. We are constantly evaluating and tweaking the picture.

An unknown species of micro moth on a holm oak (Quercus ilex) leaf. It is possible that this is the adult stage of a leaf-mining Lepidopteran.

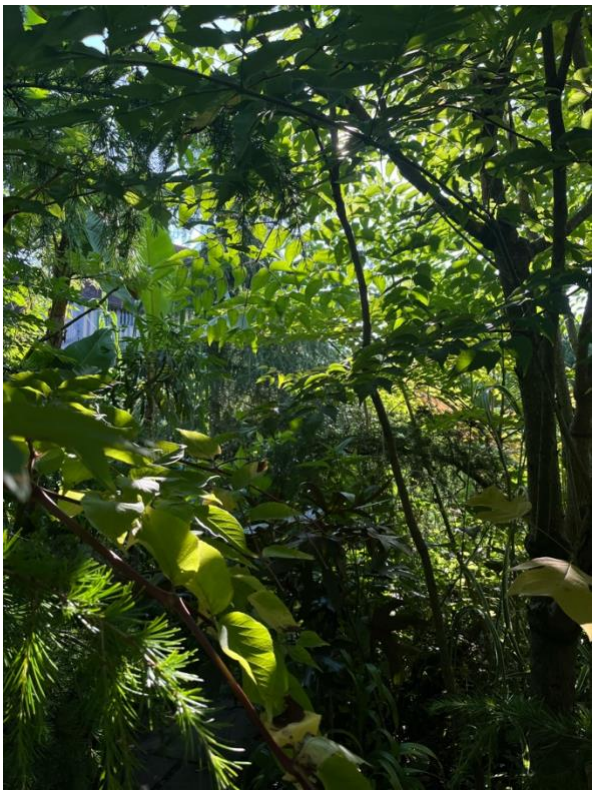
Trying new things

I grew a species of Chilean monkeyflower, *Erythranthe naiandina*, from seed which made a really nice little shady accent in the Blue Garden pot display. The early growth is a bit soft and slug susceptible, so organic slug pellets are important for when you first prick out and pot on plants. Once plants rooted into 7cm pots they were robust enough to be planted in a small container and I had no further slug problems. The plant begins flowering quite young, after only about four true leaves, and it has continued blooming for two months. The flowers are large and showy, with speckled throats and they have a beautiful pink and yellow bicolor flush. The flowers are also self-cleaning, so they drop before they wilt and brown, which is a very useful characteristic. I'm not sure that it will suitable as a bedding plant because its rather weak-stemmed, and needs a bit of support to hold itself up. It is a perennial plant and could do really nicely in a semi-shaded and moist spot in the garden. It's always interesting to try to grow new plants and see how they might perform in the garden. I am often surprised when plants that look wonderful in the wild transfer poorly to garden conditions. In this case, it is exciting to see a plant which has a bit more of a lax habit can be propped up with pea sticks to work well in a small pot.

Erythranthe naiandina growing in a small pot. The pea-sticking is quickly hidden under the thick leaves as this plant begins to lean forward out of the pot.

We're also planting in the subtropical garden which includes setting out some large accent foliage plants, such as two large Strelitzias which we planted in the ground. The subtropical garden is like a puzzle, with each herbaceous understory planting needing to fit within the layer above, to ensure that the canopy is protecting those plants sensitive to crisping. Its an interesting exercise in figuring out how to fit a large number of plants into a relatively small space, and we spend a lot of time just looking and considering the composition from different angles. Its certainly a 'feel' that you get used to feeling in your gut, and you get a sense of how to trust your instinct for where things should go.

Above: Layout of the smallest understory layer in the subtropical garden, mostly ferns and foliage plants that are susceptible to scorching. These are saved for later planting, after the larger structural layer of canopy trees and big foliage plants have knitted together to create a more complete shade.



Left: It is often best to do your planting here on a sunny day, where you can see where and how the shadows lie throughout the day.

I also had an opportunity to do a small survey on the leaf miners of Great Dixter. I have benefited from learning a great deal from two friends and mentors in the field: Charlie Eisman and Adam Kohl, who are both leaf miner experts in North America. Both of them taught me how to recognize some mines, and opened up the world of these strange insects to me. Leaf mines are formed from moths, flies, sawflies, and beetles that feed within the tissue of leaves and create characteristic patterns called mines, which contain their frass and act as a map of their movements as they feed within the leaf. They are a vital and often misunderstood group of insects which often have very particular associations with their host plants. In a day, I was able to identify about 20 species of leaf miners new to Great Dixter.

Leaf mine of Stigmella splendidissimella, the glossy bramble pygmy moth, on bramble (Rubus fruticosus).

As a whole, its been an incredible 11 months that I've spent learning at Dixter. It is a garden made by team of incredible people, and I have been extremely fortunate to learn alongside such a passionate and dedicated group of plantspeople. The heart of the garden, and my experience as a scholar, are those people, and their creativity and kindness have changed the way that I garden. More than anything, Dixter teaches sensitivity: it encourages you to look more closely at both the image and ecology of a garden. Working here is a social experience, since we live and work as a team, enjoying the highs and weathering the lows of each month in the garden. And you are exposed to so many new things here: growing odd variegated plants, golden foliage forms, and lots of different annuals has allowed me to experiment with plants that I never would have touched had I not come to Dixter. Here I discovered that carpet bedding and topiary can be

wonderful and fantastical in their own way, and they can be gardened and enjoyed alongside all the wild plants which I will always love. And even more important than the lessons of tolerance towards off-trend plantings, a garden is really an experience meant to be shared with people. I am deeply thankful to Chanticleer for providing me the opportunity to live and work at Great Dixter, and I look forward to spending three months back on the east coast gardening with the wonderful team at Chanticleer this fall.