

## October

As the garden slows down, we speed up. October is a very busy month, as we juggle hedges, meadows, seeds and cuttings. It is also the month we start to lean into autumn, and accept that it is time for corners, and eventually all, of the garden to move from one season to the next.

I think I am on record stating that hedges do not do it for me. This is not a concession, but if anywhere is able to make me reconsider it is Dixter. A little wonky in places – the desired effect – Dixter's hedges provide the formal element that makes sense of the loose, informal planting enclosed within. And they are a feature in themselves. Each tree is grown from seed, resulting in a variety of forms, and most are 100 years old. Consequently, the hedges here are full of character – character that has likely been enhanced by students' contributions the past ten or fifteen years! It is a little nerve-wracking at first, but you get into it. Ben, Michael and Fergus demonstrate, and we do our best to copy. The aim is to cut tight – really tight – but not too tight,



Autumn in the High Garden

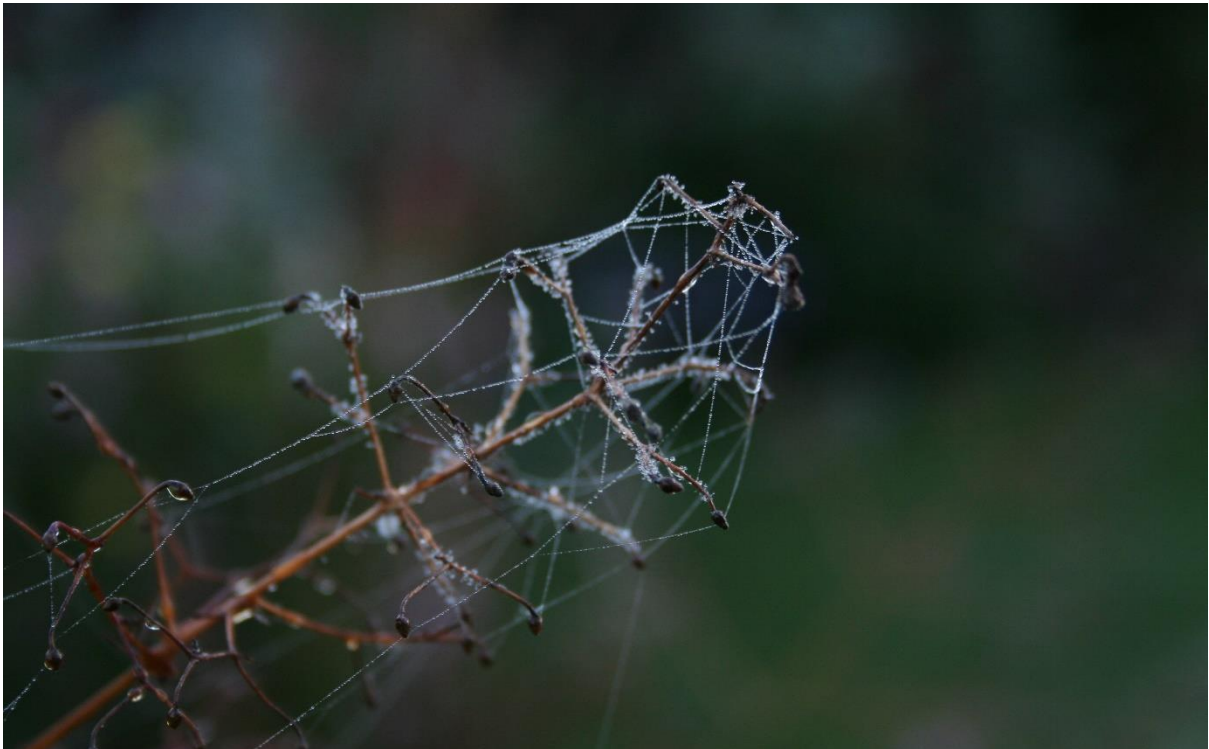
and also to cut more sympathetically in areas growing less vigorously, or in need of growing out. The tighter the hedges, however, the better they look, and the better the rest of the garden looks as it is 'let go'.

If the weather is fair, it is hedges. Quite often, foul weather means seeds – cutting in wet weather wears out the machines faster, and the gardeners for that matter. We sow a lot of our hardy and borderline hardy annuals in autumn, pulling the work from spring of the following year. This frees up time in the spring, and generally results in bigger, stronger plants a little earlier in the year. Seed we have sown in the last few weeks includes *Ammi majus*, *Campanula patula*, *Isatis tinctoria* and various calendulas, gypsophila, knapweeds, lychnis, nicotiana, poppies, silene, scabious, snapdragons and tolpis. Once sown, pots go into a double cold frame, then a cool greenhouse and



*Inula magnifica* in the Orchard

lastly the obscurely named Rhino Pen, a collection of cold frames just off the nursery, where the plants will overwinter. Each of these provides the specific conditions required for each stage of the process of growing plants from seed, from the warmth of the double frame, to the light and air circulation of the greenhouse and finally to the cool conditions of the frames in the Rhino Pen.



Dew drops and spider webs

Each student is given a project to oversee during their time at Dixter, and mine is the aftercare of this year's annuals and biennials. I'll be looking out for signs of damping off and slug and/or mouse damage, and looking to promote the growth of strong, healthy plants. The aim is to have them ready to plant out in early/mid-March of next year. This will be achieved (hopefully!) through careful ventilation, and occasional insulation, of the frames over the coming months.

Meadow work is almost finished. Autumn-flowering crocus – *C. sativus* among them, my favourite – and various colchicum have started to fade, and this is the window we have waited for. Before winter proper. We cut the meadows twice at Dixter. The second cut is important, albeit much smaller in scale than the first. It knocks back the grasses which invariably grow after the first cut, allowing light in to the seedlings of autumn-germinating species of wildflower. Without it, come spring, grasses will outcompete all but the most vigorous wildflowers. This can be done in early spring, if the meadow is not home to spring-flowering bulbs.

Tuesday of last week, the team visited the Silk Route, a garden within a garden (Woolbeding Gardens) in West Sussex. A little over two hours away, this meant an early start. Hannah, Michael and I met Ben in Hastings at 6am, and he drove us the rest of the way. I had been twice before – once with Dixter 12 months previously, as part of the Bulb Symposium – but I was excited to see it again. The garden showcases plants found along the Silk Route, from Istanbul to subtropical Asia. A Thomas Hetherwick glasshouse houses the subtropical exotics. This region, or series of regions, is extremely bulbous. As was the nature of our visit. Dixter has been involved in the planning and establishment of this garden, and also – albeit to a lesser extent – its maintenance. We will plant in the region of 12 000 bulbs over the coming weeks. The garden is not especially designed for autumn/winter interest, but *Cistus creticus* caught my eye, as did the prickly fruits of *Glycyrrhiza glabra*. My two previous visits were also in autumn, and I am determined now to see the garden in late spring/early summer.

It is impossible to detail, or indeed to mention, it all. We have visited more gardens – Highlands, Sheffield Park and John's Garden (Ashwood Nurseries) – and attended our first Great Dixter Study Day – Planning and Preparing Borders for Spring and Summer. After my success with *Crataegus pentagyna* – blind luck, I tried to explain – Coralie has tasked me with germinating *C. orientalis*. I'm trialling various approaches, involving fermentation, fridges and freezers (sorry, Connie)

We closed for the winter on Thursday, the last day of October. Over the next few months, the garden will be cut down, pulled apart and put back together again – certainly changed, and hopefully improved. I have the feeling that we are entering another phase, one laden with secrets.