Rick Mather David Scrase Christopher Lloyd Scholar August 2024

Over 6 years ago I visited Great Dixter for the first time, overwhelmed and bewildered as to how you would work in a place like that. At the time I was much more narrow minded, only wanting to mow lawns and cut hedges in formal settings. It wasn't until a year later where I was recommended by my then head gardener, Averil Milligan, to look at the training that Great Dixter offered. From here, I began to get to grips with the place. Beginning my journey, I started to look into the people, history and ethos that makes the garden what it is. I was hooked on the idea of a place that functioned holistically, with great precision and interest into making big, bold, contrasting, tactile displays. After not being accepted on the scholarship back then, my interest only grew and I spent the next two years asking myself questions about the garden and my interests to see if they aligned. Thankfully, I made it after one failed attempt, one absent attempt and one successful attempt. Having completed the year as the Christopher Lloyd scholar I was then offered a place to stay for an additional years training as the Rick Mather David Scrase Christopher Lloyd Scholar. This was an offer I couldn't refuse and cannot believe that another twelve months on this treasured land has come to a close. With that, I give great thanks to the Rick Mather David Scrase Foundation along with a special thanks to Ros, Richard and Hugh for supporting me throughout this time. It has been an absolute pleasure to be chosen for your funding. I will ensure that the skills I have learnt are carried on and used to the best of my ability in the remainder of my career and beyond.

I do not forget though, that this is my monthly report and August has been just as fulfilling as those that preceded it. As the month has passed, I have found myself more contemplative, having familiarised myself with the tasks we carry out on a weekly and annual basis. The next stage for development is observation and assessment. These are areas that I have always classed as key skills that I would like to develop as a gardener, but one that I don't believe can really be taught. For me, it requires constant active viewing, which may, for some lead to "The Gardeners Curse", an inability to just view, without assessing, questioning or desiring to amend. I feel like this is how I view the garden, sometimes, with moments being seen as an opportunity to question and criticise for the further development of the space. I don't think this is a bad thing by any means. I welcome it, and take great joy in forming an opinion about a set area, likes, dislikes and so forth. As part of the team, these then develop into conversations, ideas and recommendations to which we, as a whole curate the garden to the best of our ability. That doesn't mean we always get it right and this comes from misjudgement or the unpredictable factors that the days behold. But we do our best to correct any errors, or use it as a learning opportunity. These assessments of unsuccessful, failed or weak spots in the garden actually become some of the most invigorating conversation points. There is a knowing that there are possible changes you can make, be it in plant choice, sowing time, staking style, location and so forth, that can add a little more oomph, clarity or support to the display. There is a wider conversation than the yes' and no' when assessing, particularly around the considerations of how we have grown the plants from the get go; were they cramped in the frame, under/over watered, pricked out late, potted on late or had the seasons weather been unfavourable to the sowing at that time...? It does make it seem like a bit of a miracle when we pull off a bedding display, particularly with all the external factors that require juggling. But the praise really goes to the more experienced members of the team, those who are all too adept in the changes of the wind, knowing which way to steer the ship, should we come of course. I've never worked in a garden that is so reactive to the conditions that surround it. It makes so much more sense to garden with this in mind.

There is also never an end to the learning. Horticulture is by no measure a perfected industry and although there are techniques and resources that span back many more years than I am old, there is still the inquisitive mind that is eager to try and have failed trying, than have not tried at all. I was advised recently of an interesting technique by Jamie Todd of the nursery that Hannah at Marchant's Hardy plants uses for the propagation of *Euphorbia* cuttings. Those who are familiar with the genus will know that they have a tendency to bleed an irritating sap from any wound. But if a small amount of sharp sand is applied to each wound when taking the cutting as well as any further cuts when reducing the leaf surface, then this acts as a form of band aid to seal

the wound and reduce any further moisture loss that can occur at the critical stages of the cuttings. These can then be placed in a humid hot bench until rooting occurs. I've tried *Euphorbia* cuttings a few times with no avail, but this method has proven very successful.

During August I took part in the final session of Michael Wachter' Biodiversity course with Andy Phillips our ecologist, entomologist and arachnologist. The courses aim is to develop peoples thinking into the ways we manage garden spaces with biodiversity in mind and the factors we should look out for. Something I had not considered is how "the health of an ecosystem can be partially determined by the number of predators present". The health can be recorded by assessing the balance of the factors that are present. Many years ago the garden ceased to use any chemicals and to stop burning wood. Over that period there was an imbalance as pest levels rose, taking advantage of the oasis they were part of. Eventually equilibrium began to take form where predator numbers increased and began laying eggs in aphid populations and such. With noted increase in the invertebrates and arachnid populations along with the bird and bat life to follow, feeding on all the invertebrates and such. As well there would have been an increase in reptiles, amphibians, mammals and not to forget, molluscs. The faithful pest we all know and love. Now, when we view the garden, it is all too easy to admire the joys of life that are flying and running around the garden, but it is important to remember that this is a living ecosystem where hunting is at the forefront for much of the wildlife. Recently Connie, our Adam Greathead Scholar, identified a baby grass snake at the edge of the horse pond. There have been a lot of these observed throughout the year, particularly in the sunk garden pond, where concerns rose for the great crested newt population within. We discussed ideas on ways to protect them, but in reality the best thing we can do is to take no action. We garden ornamentally with all the external benefits falling inline with those processes. Naturally the balance of predator and prey will fluctuate from time to time with one species outcompeting another. In reality it is the same in the context of ornamental gardening. We consider the competition potential of a plant or an area and then make our decisions…but again, there are those external factors of self sowing and weather which can act more favourably in the direction of a certain variety. This year, the winter/spring rain was fairly relentless and one of the results to come from this is the way that *Oenanthe crocata*, (Hemlock Water Dropwort) took over around the horse pond and began to set its mark up in the prairie meadow. It's super competitive and taking complete advantage of the situation it exists in. Should we have a dry winter and a baking spring then all this could change as others swap out for their time around the pond and meadow. The meadow has been trialled in Christopher Lloyds time to establish North American prairie plants, but there are few that can deal with the competition of our grasses that grow throughout the winter. The competition is fierce and not appropriate for all. Andy Phillips informed us on the course of the plants at Great Dixter and in the wider landscape that do the most benefit for wildlife in terms of feeding and habitat. Hogweed, Creeping Thistle, Ragwort and Ivy! Its madness really as these are the plants that get such bad press from agriculture and certain horticultural settings. There is of course an acceptance to these concerns in contamination for feed but (from what I've read) generally cows and horses have to eat an absurd amount for this to be the case. Sheep have the ability to digest plants like ragwort before any toxic elements have the ability to build up. Ivy is a fantastic pollinator source, flowering late in the season and having very accessible flowers for flies of all sizes as well as wasps, shield bugs, crane flies, etc. Creeping thistle and hogweed may be up there in the more testing/challenging of those plants for their ability to colonise large areas with masses of seed and big brutish plants. That's not to say that these plants should be grown everywhere, just that it's important to acknowledge their role in our ecosystem as a whole. One thing that I came away from the course with is that Great Dixter is always changing. We garden areas differently on an annual basis, we run different plants through the beds and boarders many times in a year and not always the same the following year. We allow the seed bank to build up, allowing for self-sowing to tie the plantings together. There is permanence in the structures throughout the garden but not all of them. Some are ephemeral and break down over a long time, feeding many forms of wildlife and fungi. A Michael and Andy stated, the garden is essentially mimicry of the natural ecosystem. There are stable elements with permanence in the structures, along with complexity of change that we cultivate throughout the garden. The question I ask myself, is how do you move this into the spaces that need it most?

Prior to cutting the Topiary Meadow this year I noticed a few anthills developing parallel to the paths. I feel very fortunate to be part of a team that is flexible in their thinking and willing to

adapt and change the way we work. We spent time before cutting, walking the meadow to identify those anthills and mark them with canes and bailing twine. Never had I realised how essential these tools were before coming to the garden. Few jobs cannot be completed without them. Anthill ecology plays an important role in the meadow where, (similar to the interaction you may see on your broad beans) ants farm root-feeding aphids, milking them for honeydew. The ants tend to build up, mounding the soil particles up and up as they create burrows as well as building their hill higher than the surrounding vegetation so that more heat is reached from the sun. They create a different soil composition, with varying nutrient and water holding capacities. It forms a secondary habitat within the meadow with bare patches that the predominant species growing can't handle. This results in the floral diversity increasing as those that can handle it regenerate on those sites. There can be anywhere from 8000 to 40,000 yellow meadow ants living in a large colony of an ant hill which is also a superb food source for the green woodpecker. The life span of the hills can be incredibly long and is one of the reasons why it is important for us to acknowledge them in the meadows. Swerving round the anthills with the track master may make cutting a little more complex but its easily outweighed when you consider the benefits in diversifying the meadow.

It's time to decide when and how to switch between floral interest and seed heads in the garden: Do we hold our nerve for a stronger winter seed head display, leaving the turning flowers as they move from bouquet, through decay to seed play. That seed source is so important in the garden for structural impact throughout winter as well as all the benefits that seed heads hold for wildlife. Of course, initially it muddies the picture, looking unkempt and in some cases a little miserable. To the visitor, it may, as Michael Wachter would say, "make them feel like they have missed something, where as a flower bud shows promise of what is yet to come". Deadheading solves the issue but at a compromise if you consider the remaining season and if it has the ability to produce a second flush…. and possibly seed heads later on as well? The question we ask ourselves is, does it add to the picture with or without the seed head? Could a temporary cleaner image be the answer? Each has to be assessed on a case-by-case basis as to the material present and how long is left on the season, as well as the predicted weather.

Naciim, our Ruth Borun Scholar asked me before he left to return to Washington DC, which aspects of the garden do you find intriguing/interesting? There are many, all of varying contexts, but one of the main ones for me is the differing responses that we get from the visitors. Some pros, some cons. At times it can be a little hard to take if they are negative, but in reality it's always best to try and take them constructively and view those points objectively. We can get very nostalgic and attached to our work and potentially miss some of the finer points that should be considered when it relates directly to the paying public. Secondly though, it's quite interesting to create a space that challenges people and makes them feel uncomfortable, giving them the opportunity to question what they like and what they dislike. Given this, does the dislike come from a mis/lack of understanding or does it carry gravity and logistics in the final outcome. If not, the latter, then it is our role to educate and enlighten on the aspects in the way we garden, making the work readable and comprehensive. I am intrigued about being challenged and questioning what it is to me that makes this space so special. I'm proud to be part of this place and have a group of teachers with willingness to explore and create a space that engages with people and the broader wild side in a way that is unfamiliar or uncommon to the norm. It's holistic and broader than meets the eye. The beginning of something new is the end of something old. As Christopher said, "Plants come first, people who love plants come second". The garden is generous. It gives and gives to viewers as well as wildlife. It takes your energy and converts it into energy of a different form, immersing the viewer to encourage thought and internal expression and then relate that to emotion and feeling. Be the result a positive or a negative, it is a result none the less.

The processes and assessments we make at Great Dixter look for longevity and the visual benefits of the displays. A display that looks good at the beginning of a season/point in time is highly unlikely to hold on to its highs and look good at the end of that period of time. The meadows, for example, look fantastic in the summer when orchids (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) sway with crested dogs tail (*Cynosurus cristatus)*, sweet vernal grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*), red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) and cats ear (*Hypochaeris radicata)*, with ox-eyes and knapweeds just

highlighting the displays. Bulbs predominantly define the stages before and after the peak. following the peak it is mainly knapweed that is the highlight, with seed heads developing over time. The meadows can begin to look a little tired at this stage as they gradually brown or get beaten by late seasonal weather shifts. They still have benefit here, particularly for grasshoppers and crickets orchestrating the soundtrack to the setting, and the developing of seed heads is crucial for the longevity of the meadow to ensure that the seed bank persists. The same principles apply to that of an ornamental bed, in terms of the display holding its high. For us, the trick is how we stretch the display, like working a ball of dough to create a larger bouncier loaf of bread. It's the constant careful edit at work again, amending those seams, tweaking the corners. Predominantly this is carried out through our use of annuals that we dot through the beds in patches, swathes or throughout the whole stretch. Sometimes we use a combination of these with each other to create a bolder picture. This year in the Barn Garden, Ben and Talitha spent great efforts in planting *Cosmos* 'Double Click Cranberries', with *Dahlia* 'Zorro', *Persicaria orientalis*, *Lythrum virgatum* 'Rosy Gem' and the odd *Amaranthus hybridus* 'Opopeo' dotted through. Apart from the *Lythrum*, everything is treated as an annual. The end result was a silly wash of pinks, maroons and jazzy jammy reds. It was incredibly well executed and one of the first views to behold the visitors when entering the garden from the east side. The display has longevity built in through the variety choices, with the only interventions being staking and deadheading to prolong the flowering display. As the *Lythrum* went over then this can be edited out or potentially left for the winter seed display. Eventually the display will lose energy and deteriorate as our season comes to a close at which point there is little we can do to rectify the display on account of the growing conditions not being favourable enough to allow any plants to bulk out. There is of course an exception to my initial point and that lies in the complexity of planting logistics that Christopher Lloyd was so informed on. One that always catches my attention is in the Blue Garden along the western edge of the house. The display is all about foliage with the bonus flower popping up to greet and looks great from the get go. Initially *Colchicums* emerge with *Adiantum venustum*, to be followed by the unfurling of *Osmunda regalis* whilst the *Colchicums* go to leaf before *Rodgerisa'* spread their palmate leaves among the display. Mixed in and around the edges of the other side are *Pulmonarias* and *Persicarias* that dot themselves through at the appropriate times of the year. It's a fully settled display, comfortable and loose, no intervention required except the annual tidy. As one thing dies back, another comes up to take its place and those later season plants are so content in their position that they hold the ground, with little deterioration to be noticed. It looks as good at the beginning as it does in the end, although different. There is also no competition; all the elements know their place in the orchestra and stay well within their lines. We have highs in the displays we make and lows to follow and to that we amend and construct, but the real art is to observe and understand your planting palate along with the setting in which you wish to plant. From there, your displays can reach the crescendo and play their song for the remainder of the season. To this I am incredibly grateful to have spent another year learning with Fergus in these techniques and allowing Christopher's experiences to flow through him into the energy, enthusiasm and ethos that Great Dixter holds.

Rob Leonard Flack.