

## November

The garden is very quiet now.

A number of starlings have taken up residence in an old ash tree just off the topiary lawn, occasionally diving down to pick at the fruit of five handsome specimens of *Malus hupehensis* in the car park. They are there each morning, as I walk from the cottage into the garden. And each evening, as I walk back. I am hoping they stay after the tree is stripped.

Hedges are ongoing, but our priorities have shifted these last few weeks. The arrival of colder weather has set our minds to protecting the garden's tender plants, and bulbs.

We have had our first hard frost, on the evening of Tuesday 19. Fortunately, we were prepared. The previous week, we had pulled apart the tender understory of the Exotic Garden, lifting plants and moving them into, and filling, several greenhouses. Before overflowing into the Education Room. Begonias, hedychioms and colocasias; adiantum and pteris ferns; woodwardias; strelitzias, bananas and oreopanax; *Farfugium japonicum*; clivias; cordylines, strobilanthes, tagetes – and more. Six greenhouses, and one Education Room, will house these plants for the winter and much of spring. Elsewhere, cannas and dahlias are in storage, and root-hardy plants – *Melanoselinum decipiens*, for example – protected in-situ.

Under glass; in the cellar; in-situ, under hay and/or hessian, and as rooted cuttings, the garden's tender plants settle down and wait for the warmer months.

We carry on, in the cold.

As the year draws to a close, bulbs are also high-priority. We use bulbs in a number of ways in the garden: in permanent areas, bedding pockets and pot displays. In the permanent areas, there is often a considerable amount of work to be done before we are ready to plant. We work off boards regardless of the weather – to protect the soil, and to keep tidy. In this way, we are able to work in the borders in all but the foulest weather.

Perennials are first marked out using bamboo canes – we lie canes flat on the ground to mark out groups, and then drive shorter canes behind each plant in a group. The horizontal canes help us to read the border, distinguish one group from the next and see where the space is, after the herbaceous is cut down. Vertical canes – driven some way in, showing maybe three or four inches – are useful later on. These indicate that a plant should occupy that space, and suggest something has gone wrong if one cannot be found.

After the canes, we cut plants down to 6-12 inches. The area is weeded, and self-sowers adjusted. Self-sowers – forget-me-nots, honesty, ox-eye daisies and others – are an essential component of all of Dexter's borders, adding depth and looseness. But they are closely managed, and not allowed at the expense of the perennials. Plants such as heleniums, phlox and rudbeckia do not appreciate competition, and we take care to give them the space they require.

As we go along, we tie plants up – to give us the space to work in, and to avoid damaging them. Grasses/seedheads which offer winter interest, or shrubs still a little way off pruning. Groups of perennials may require splitting/re-setting, and this would be done during the adjustment of the self-sowers. Borderline hardy plants may be lifted, potted and kept under glass through the winter.

When it comes to the bulbs, various effects can be achieved depending on the manner in which they are laid out. Generally, we opt for informal, and lay the bulbs out in such a way that their placement

appears random – unevenly spaced, alternating (randomly) between pockets of high and low density. The effect that this has imitates the way plants often grow and spread in the wild. Placement is, of course, quite considered. Bulbs are concentrated in the spaces between perennials, bleeding into these groups to a great/lesser extent depending on the vigour of the bulb and the robustness of the perennial. Tulips, which we are planting a lot of, are kept on a tight leash. A tulip would push out a helenium. Likewise, alliums. Snowdrops, crocuses and scillas, or chionodoxa, however, might be allowed to sit right alongside a perennial. It really depends.

My project – the Rhino Pen, and the overwintering of next year's annuals – is going well. No major losses, although the nicotiana – *N. mutabilis*, 'Bella' and 'Watercolours' – is looking a little sorry for itself. I've been told, and reassured, that it's not always wildly enthusiastic about being sown in the autumn. We've pinched out the sweet peas, which have put on lots of healthy growth. In fact, the floor of many of the frames is an encouraging shade of green – young plants beginning to knit together in their plug trays. We will likely pot up some of the poppies, *Ammi majus* and one or two others before Christmas. In the meantime, I have these frames chocked whenever possible, to slow their growth.

December next, and winter proper.