

Christopher Lloyd Scholarship report – April

How better to start April than with the spring plant fair. Meeting, greeting, purchasing and of course car parking in the seasonal slop that the rain so kindly brings. It was a great bonding experience with the team, chatting with nurseries and looking at interesting plants. Also all who came, including the ones who ended up with a new muddy paint job on their cars, had a great visit. The buzz throughout the garden and the plant sale field was palpable.

April also brought in the next round of successful applicants aiming to take my role and make this their next horticultural step. Quite peculiar is the experience of walking them round the garden, knowing not but 12 months ago I was doing exactly that. It was a pleasure to share with them all the joys of the scholarship, the garden, the plants and most of all, the people. It's a place of sharing the experiences within and to that I believe I played my part.

The weather is changing. Spring is seeping in. The morning dew fades rapidly each morning until no longer does it visit me when I open my curtains. But with this is the changing of temperature and sunlight intensity. The cold frames have been going through a slight switch in their requirements. New seedlings, bigger plants that lead to more watering, shade netting, venting and spacing. Careful control of the atmosphere to ensure they don't scorch or wilt, whilst getting maximum growth out of them now that the restrictions that frost brings has passed.

April was really the time to see the Tulip. All that work carried out back in November, disassembling the borders to stitch the new designs through. It paid off, all until the tulip fire blight turned up but we will brush past that unfortunate circumstance and accept that a wet year can lead to the rise of the pathogen. Although, interesting to see how the plant does deteriorate with its presence. Mottled leaves and petals and in the worst circumstances the bulb rots off. Yet again there were those who were completely bullet proof, such as *Tulipa* 'Ballerina'. A vibrant orange lily flowered tulip, scented of mandarin with a lick of heat from the sun. Other favourites of mine were 'White Valley' in the Long boarder, very blousy and showy, much more so than any other in the garden. 'Brown Sugar' was also on the long boarder, a vibrant coppery orange with darker tones. It sat right in the middle of the boarder, lighting up from as far away as you could see it. To that, it really "paid its rent". *Tulipa saxatalis*, a clear pale pink with a yellow centre. Delightful! I could easily list them all but I'll just give one more from the top of my favourites list, that being 'Praestons Shogun'. A yellow/marigold coloured tulip, short, dainty and very well behaved. It was sat just in front of a naturalised swath of *Muscari*, a strong combo to say the least. We viewed all the tulips and looked at them critically, judging them on their height, colour, habit, leaf, beauty upon senescence and the combination they were sat with. This process not only helped me in my critical thinking about the tulips as opposed to just ogling them. But also in developing an idea as to what may be used in the garden next year and quite rightly, what shouldn't.

Further developments have taken place in the High Garden stock bed. Digging out large clumps of perennials and digging over to remove those pernicious

bindweeds and ground elders. A new design has been put in place with a circular movement with groups of *Nicotiana* & *Scabiosa*. To follow are the *Amaranthus*, *Cannas* and *Dahlias*. It'll be a late season display but with the benefit being that we will be able to keep chiselling away at those weeds and take back control. It'll likely take two years at least to eradicate them, with continuous digging and removal in their wake.

Madelaine and I thickened up the planting in the Lower Orchard Garden. This was mostly with *Papaver somniferum* 'Lauren's Grape' in a large movement across the bed whilst also having *Salvia uliginosa* scattered in handsome groups. I love how we are taught to plant here. Everything has "high-low density" written all over it, teaching me to forget the structured setting out I am used to. Don't think. Just plant. As soon as the logical mind comes into play then the creativity dwindles rapidly and before you know it all the plants are evenly spaced and in a grid, looking too obvious. I can't say I've noticed such a formality in nature. And why do I love natural landscapes so much...?... because they're unpredictable. Everyone's bundled in together and left to fend for themselves. Now, we don't plant to encourage competition, that wouldn't be fair. But we do plant naturally, with spacing in mind. It's a touch of William Robinson really and a good consideration to the form each plant is going to take. Seeing the garden now really makes me notice how natural it looks, almost effortless. But it turns out that looking effortless takes a lot more work than I thought. It's a gentle, consistent edit.

In Vietnam, within the Orchard Garden, the scholars and I took to making use of our autumn sown hardy annuals. This time we were planting *Cynoglossum amabile*, and airy flowered little wonder in the Boraginaceae, so with that are the classic forget-me-not flowers but with a larger ovate, pale leaf. We were reminded of the lesson learned a while back where the surrounding plants are taken into consideration to what they will be doing in a couple of months from now. Planting accordingly so that the already present foliage doesn't swallow them up. Vietnam isn't an area we attend to very often. It's low maintenance and to that it plays a key role in acting as a naturalised woodland from the east. It's mostly left to its own devices apart from a gentle snip or a new plant here and there. It's a huge space, as long as it is wide, with no entry to its centre. It's viewed only from the outside. Previously a stock bed, it now acts as a dense vista. Shrubs, trees and understory draw me in as I wonder of the treats that may be hidden in the middle. It's the same sensation I get when driving past dense woodland, with speckled light and winding branches. I just want to go in and find what's inside. Wanderlust. I would say that Vietnam and the High Garden Stock Bed are of similar size, but the reason I think I feel this in Vietnam over the other is because of the canopy that greets you along the main path.

A few additional *Clarkia*' have been added to the Barn Garden to strengthen the numbers as well as lengthen the view. Fergus showed us how to plant with consideration to the vistas that visitors will see, trying to imagine the plants in flower and where the empty spaces are. They can't just be slung in anywhere, they must be suitable and considered in relation to the planting, ensuring to use the natural gaps. These tasks of planting small numbers of annuals are crucial as it releases pressure on space down the nursery by getting those plants out whilst

balancing the nursery work to be done for future plantings. The trick is to grow on more and more seeds so we have a safety net for these spaces. Included in this is preparation of the *Cannas* & *Dahlias*. Removing further stock from the cellar, dividing and choosing strong tubers/rhizomes. These are then potted up in our nutrient rich mix and put into cold frames with the lid on. They're left here to get hot!..hot!..hot!.. so that they get their roots down quickly and get plenty of growth on for when we need them in the next bedding scheme. The *Dahlias* need to have an "eye" on each tuber if they are to grow. They are quite tricky to split, as the connecting tissues are fairly fragile. We took large clumps of *Dahlias* and looked to see if there was any movement within them and then separated them or cut them in two, sometimes three on the bigger clumps. If a division is made without a growing eye at the top then it is believed that no growth will take place. I have trialled this theory by taking a collection of those tubers that did break off and potted them up to see what would happen. As so happens, I forgot about them until the other day when I turned out a pot of what I thought was just soil mix, to find my test tubers. Many of which had begun to shoot. I am uncertain if they had hidden eyes on them that I missed or in fact the tubers can produce shoots quite happily. They've been replanted to assess their growth. It may turn out that they grow but the plants are insubstantial. Time will tell.

Andrew and myself took on tackling the front porch pot display. The advice of our peers was mildly ignored with the hope of creating something spectacular and mad! But after a strong critique, which we so asked for, we realised that we needed to learn the basics first. Big bold groups, solid structure, space and plants that look good from the get go. We shouldn't have to wait for it to look good. Notes on the display were questioning us to ask how long a plant will last in the display? How is the balance overall? Create a bold idea and work around that. Anchor plants are necessary to hold the space. Be mindful of the negative space, if there is none then it all bleeds together in one big blob. These were all great points and we decided to re-do it after work a few days later. We both felt humbled on our next critique. Feeling that we had learnt from our mistakes, keeping it simple but effective. The display should be a statement, not a suggestion.

Lastly for April was a look at the planting combinations as well as singular plants in pots. The assessment was used to discuss next year's combinations, with us all taking time to discuss ideas we would like to see, why and how they may work. I find it difficult in these situations as I am still learning about successful combinations and am never 100% sure if what I am suggesting will work. But each is always met with a considered response to teach me further. So in that, I guess it works. We now have a large white board full of ideas to be played with next year, some safe bets, some experimental. Overall they will be very interesting.

Rob Leonard Flack.