

Christopher Lloyd Scholarship report – May

Peony's! All over the garden, in little nooks and crannies. *P. delavayi* in the Sunken Garden, adorned by hornets that were large enough to be mistaken for juvenile robin. A slightly sultry coloured peony with dark, blood red petals. They're sizable tree peony's in the Sunken Garden, given enough space to entertain us with their delicate show before our vision is diverted to the *Thalictrums*, *Digitalis* and *Euphorbias*. It's a little game of "divert the attention" that the plants seem to play, aided by us. Looking back at the space now, the peony isn't really a focal point at all, as the eye is naturally drawn to the other more stimulating views. These are constantly changing pockets that breath through each stage of their life, the rise and fall from one moment to another. Being here daily it happens so subtly, but being away for two or three really makes that shift much more noticeable. Also on the Peony line up is *P. mascula*, subsp. *arietina*; Great big juicy spherical buds opening to a strong vibrant pink, long lasting, for a peony. Tucked in the darkest corner of the Peacock Garden sits *P. rockii*, peaking through the dappled canopy of *Viburnum* and *Chimonanthus*. Huge frilly white blooms flashed with deep pink at the base. Lastly on my list of peonys is *P. tenuifolia*, small, delicate and intricate. Not a showstopper, but certainly a plant of intrigue with feathered ferny foliage and bright red globular flowers.

As the month began, the garden unfolded into its "wilder side". White fluffy clouds of *Anthriscus sylvestris* towered gracefully among the beds, distracting from any tulip foliage and adding a romantic whimsical sensation to the whole garden. I've always adored cow parsley in the wild but never seen it integrated into a garden in such a way. Terrifying to some for it's potential to run wild through the space, but in reality, understanding the point to cut it out is all it takes. This comes from time to time as they gradually go over and the seed heads discolour. By this time, they've served their purpose and this visual aesthetic detracts from the arrangement below. It's a gamble, but one well worth taking. Sure, its not to everyone's cup of tea, and this "wilder side" of Great Dixter can be a bit triggering to the ideal of a more formal model. But where would the fun be in creating a space that's already been through the motions years past. I think for me this is one of the defining features of the planting style at Great Dixter. Its not looking for approval, its looking for expression and originality and it achieves that by pushing the boundaries of what people think acceptable in a garden setting. It's a lesson in taking charge of ideas, trialling them and observing the outcome. Within this is a playfulness that the team gets to express their ideas and fantasies. Together, it works...but also it opens up an interesting conversation with those who find it difficult to digest. "Weeds" are subjective to your own situation, all plants are valid, plants are all wild to a certain extent, excusing the cultivation but that all comes from wild specimens, so why would these more wild varieties be any less valuable than the others. At the end of the day, plants are the dominant species and they allow us into their sandbox, for which we gratefully enjoy their presence. I'm open to the idea of a garden that pushes my own thoughts as well as other peoples. We won't get anywhere from sitting still.

With the coming of visitors come the tours. The tours are pretty free and allow us to express our knowledge of the garden. It's different from working with people of course because you have to capture all the hot points of your work within an hour. I find it amazing really, that once I get going, how much I have learnt. Sure, these reports are a good vice, but the tours reaffirm the information and really put into perspective how diverse the workload is here.

As we head into summer, the work is ever developing. On the list is the "constant careful edit". The garden has reached its crescendo and now runs the task of maintaining it there, with the hope of consistency all the way to closure. It's a fine line, walking on thin ice as we tread one day at a time to keep the spaces crisp and naturalised at the same time. More footfall means more damage. Staking, pea sticking and hurdles being the main task throughout. The paths close up as the plants increase and we have to encourage visitors to welcome those spaces instead of being deterred by them. Smart Pruning as Michael calls it. The size of the path is relevant to the tactile experience. We edit without editing, tuning down the intensity of the tactile experience. It's the constant careful edit.

In the Barn Garden I've cleared all the spent flower heads of *Hyacinthoides hispanica*, just pulling them out from under the *Osmanthus*. The foliage is thick! Yet gradually pushing through are *Thalictrums*, *Begonias* & *Persicarias*. It's incredibly really. The ability of a simple combination to be able to push through such a mass of thick, strap-like leaves. No problem! Of course it's down to the species, but still, just to entertain that idea is enough.

I was fortunate enough to attend Chelsea flower show. It's outstanding really what the designers are capable of pulling off in three weeks. Some of these spaces looked as if they had been there for decades. It entertained many ideas of what garden design and gardening are. The spaces pushed the limits very differently to what I am currently familiar with. Some technically very strong, others conceptually very thought provoking. For me, Danny Clarke and Tayshan Hayden Smith' Green Gap Garden was a clear winner. The garden was part of the Grow2Know charity. The design was based on the simplicity of a concrete block, cracked open with native wildflowers sown within. Its concept was to educate and describe the contrast of green space between privileged and unprivileged Londoners, with the charity aiming to empower young people through horticulture. For me, having lived in London for 10 years previously, I felt that I could connect with this garden more than some of the others. It brought a conversation to the forefront and since then I haven't stopped thinking about it. I am sure that once my training is complete I will find myself back in London. I've thought a lot, since moving to horticulture, that the urban landscape is horticulturally in need of more development, more community interaction, and more education. I feel very privileged to be in the position I am at Great Dixter. I myself feel empowered by the skills I am learning, with the belief that I would be in a good position to help educate others and close that green gap. It would be different to how it is in a large-scale garden, the management and the logistics are a completely different cup of gravy, but the execution can be the same. If I do this, then I am confident that the training will have been of great benefit to myself and others I can take on the journey. The design style at Dixter is complex

yet simple. Once you get your eye in and understand the layers then everything else gradually falls into place. That's not to say it's easy! As I still find it difficult to plan such a space, but it will come with time and I am certain the skills here will be used for the rest of my horticultural life.