

Christopher Lloyd Scholarship report – February

February started with a journey to Woolbeding to aid in the planting and development of the Silk Route design. Much had changed since our last visit with many small bulbs showing their faces. Of particular interest was *Iris danfordiae*, a tiny little fellow of about 10cm height, pale lemon yellow with a green spotted tongue and an orange crest. A real show stopper for early season interest...scented as well. Throughout the rest of the Silk route we were planting autumn sown *Papaver commutatum*, stitching them through the regions in high-low density to give a naturalised aesthetic.

We also had our pruning symposium throughout the beginning of February, much like the bulb symposium, a group of keen snipping & clipping individuals joined us for a week to learn from us in the ways we prune our different shrubs and climbers. For us, pruning is a way to maximise flowering, health, vigour, increase size of flowers, control size, rejuvenate, encourage bigger leaves, encourage good foliage colour, encourage juvenile foliage, encourage stem colour, improve texture, stop seeding and to form structure. This is all carried out by exercising control on the specimens. The trouble I have had in the past is working out if a plant flowers on current or previous seasons growth. Now, assuming that a plant has been maintained appropriately then this should be easy to tell, but if not then the tell-tell signs are the un-branched shoots. If these are present then it is safe to say that the plant grew these within the last 12 months and the lack of branching means they have not flowered. On the same shrub there will likely be shoots that have branched and these are the shoots that were formed within the year prior and then flowered the following year. Fergus explained it to us many times with multiple examples, bringing ease to illustration and a dampener to frustration. Alas, these branched and un-branched stems prove it flowers on previous seasons growth and the branched stems can be removed so that the un-branched can flourish in the coming year. There are a few circumstances where these simple rules need to be assessed more carefully, such as when a plant is not flowering/growing so well due to stress of some sort. In which case it is of more interest to prune out the weakest flowered stems and then reassess if the strongest flowered stems can be of any use in the coming season. Also worth considering is if the plant can produce enough new shoots in relation to how much has been taken out. AKA; the root:shoot ratio. Are the roots in balance with the shoots? The amount removed can lead to more bud break, as energy in the roots will force action. Although this isn't in all cases and can lead to a light dose of senescence, for example, the cutting hard back of a plant that isn't keen to the technique.

During the symposium, I was paired with Michelle from Chicago. We worked to overcome her fear and intimidation of large messy shrubs that are well overdue their visit to the barbers. Thankfully, we were given the *Rosa filipes* in the Exotic Garden. A welcoming mass of winding whips and thorns. Not even prince charming would know where to start with this one, and neither did we. So, assessment, tracing each flowered whip back across the roof to see where it meets the main body of the plant and if there are any strong non flowered shoots leading off of it. If not, snip snip snip. But if so then more careful pruning was carried out

to thin out the rambler and gradually remove each piece of flowered wood. The *Rosa* was tackled in several doses and eventually Ben and I tied it in and up as best we could, leaving a tidy covering across the rose garden hovel. Michelle later informed me that she felt more confident with intimidating pruning jobs. Hazard!!! Among others we pruned were *Viburnum*, *Cotinus*, *Hydrangea*, *Rosa* and *Salix*.

Following on from this was a visit to Grunberg to the ISU, International perennial plant conference. A broad selection of speakers, all with their own interests and subjects to discuss. Along with this was plenty of time to meet and greet with them and all the other visitors of the ISU. I've not had many chances to meet and mingle with such a range of people and professionally "talk plants". The venue was fantastic, comfortable and welcoming with all meals catered for and a little bar in the evening to open up the conversations. Speakers that I found of most interest and relevance were Peter Korn, who spoke in depth about his planting styles and techniques of planting into sand and how it makes the plants more resistant to environmental stresses. It was a real eye opener into a way of planting that I would never of considered for it being too risky or just unsuccessful. Alas, it is not and plants are able to grow from a young plant to a mature plant, adapting to the situation they are grown in and in turn being stronger over all. A great way to look at planting in the urban sense and how to minimise maintenance overall, meaning more energy can be placed elsewhere to develop more spaces. The other speaker of particular interest to me was Yasemin Konuralp, a Turkish lady who gave two very interesting presentations on Turkish flora. The first being that of the bulbous plants of the Taurus Mountains. The second was on Perennials of North East and Eastern Turkey. Both presentations gave an in depth look into these regions with fantastic detail of the plants as well as the communities and habitats that they grow in. I had several chats with Yasemin regarding her trips as the other students and I are looking to take a trip to Turkey later this year to look at wild plant communities. We exchanged details and I am to email her soon with thoughts on our trip. She said she would be more than willing to give us advice and help us arrange. What are the chances!!! The ISU was amazing over all but my meeting with Yasemin was really too perfect and I am all too grateful that she was happy to help us. At the end of the event we met one of the head gardeners of the Palmengarten in Frankfurt who agreed to give us a tour of some new areas they had developed as well as the Tropicarium glasshouses. Easily one of the most impressive glasshouse plant collections I have ever seen and made all the better for having the spaces explained to us by Svet, the head gardener. During the mingling session in the bar, myself and Andrew had a fairly lengthy chat with Cassian Schmidt about all things plants, from design, wild trips, identification and the like. On our last day we took a little trip to see his garden, Hermannshof. To our surprise, he was there and very kindly gave us a grand tour of the garden, explaining each area, the plants, successes and failures. It was all quite unprecedented and unexpected but we were all incredibly glad we were in the right place at the right time. This is to just mention a few of the highlights from the conference. Many great people were met, contacts exchanged and information shared. I am highly thankful for getting a chance to attend the ISU as it has been incredibly eye opening and beneficial to my career moving forward.

Other tasks that we have carried out across February include; hardening off plants in the Rhino Pen. Slowing them down so that they don't get too large before it is time to plant them out. The plants in the frames have been controlled more through larger chocks or removing the lights to allow more air in and slow the rate of transpiration/enzyme activity. Eventually they will need to be hardy enough so that they can survive for themselves out in the garden and this is what we are preparing for. We have also been doing a little fine-tooth combing through the beds, tidying, cutting back and mulching where required. Not too heavily or the natural seed bank will be compromised. The students and I were given the duty and honour of pruning the fan-trained figs in the barn garden. Here the aim was to tie in all strong shoots, reduce long ones, fan out branches appropriately and remove weak/crossing branches. My specimen was to the far left, behind the *Olearia solandri*, which was cut back hard after damage from the last snowstorm. Alas, the fig is in prime view and is, in my opinion, a real showstopper to that side of the barn. Snowdrop season has also been upon us with a beauty of varieties such as *Galanthus* 'Trumps', with outer petals striped green. *G.* 'Bill Bishop', short but with large pendulous flowers, and my favourite, *G. plicatus* 'Hippolyta', a solitary snowdrop, with double white flowers. A real treat to tilt the head and find the interest inside.

I have been able to input my opinion in additional planting of conifers in the Blue Garden. Unfortunately the *Hebe* has taken a turn for the worst and the decision was to take it out, but in its place were an assortment of strange characters to tie bring a new lease of life to the bed. Included in these are *Pinus strobus* 'Minuta' & *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Wissels Saguaro'. Both of which are very opposing in their habits but tied in with the *Astelia* flowing through the bed. All of which can now be seen since the *Hebe* is gone. The bed has more of a rhythm to it, carrying your eye through and bouncing off the varying shapes and structures.

On the design front, I have also been working with Ben Jones in the additional annual planting in the Barn Garden. We have stitched *Ammobium grandiflorum* through in small-large clumps of varying density. These are really to test the plants capabilities in the garden and see how it interacts. Does it play well with others, does it have bare legs, how long's the season, does it flop? All of which will have to be assessed at a later date, but this aspect is what makes the placement at Great Dixter quite exciting. Assess the unexpected, trialling and not being afraid to get it wrong. It's what the garden thrives on and is how it has become such an interesting hub for ornamental horticulture. Along with these we also planted white larkspur through the south-eastern corner as these will play nicely with the ladybird poppies we then planted throughout. The vibrant reds will stand out nicely against the white spikes of the larkspur and vice versa. This combo was used last year but amendments have been made to it this year with the aim of making it even more spectacular. I'll report back in the coming months.

Rob Leonard Flack.