

September at Dixter

by Madelaine LeDew



Aug 30th: Arrive at Great Dixter.

A dense labyrinth of Taxus envelopes bold, heavy, high-contrast planting schemes. Foreboding historic architecture casts a long shadow over the surrounding garden rooms.

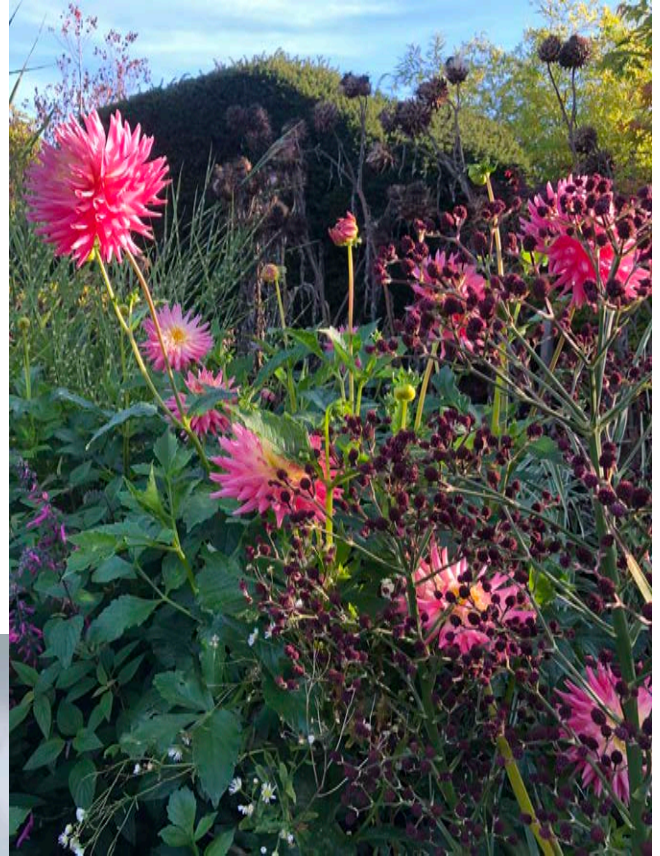
The season is at its peak expression of jovial, chaotic abundance. An unseasonably hot, dry summer picture fades as the first suggestions of an autumn picture begins. Exuberant Dahlias and Cosmos reach a late summer crescendo high above the promise of budding Asters, skeletal Teasels and unfurling Miscanthus.

Density and Levity spar with each other. The garden is whimsical without being airy, assertive without being austere.



My daily tasks include sweeping, deadheading, de-browning, and staking with "the Dixter tie". I have been assigned the Long Border garden to maintain daily. Here are a few of my favorite Long Border vignettes:

- 1) A skeleton of Teasel (*Dipsaucus*) supports the ubiquitous *Erigeron annuum*, described to me as the "sparkle", "glitter", or "frosting" that acts as icing on the cake of much denser plantings.
- 2) Dahlia 'Kilburn Fiesta' glows behind a screen of *Eryngium pandanifolium*. Cardoon (*Cynara cardunculus*) looms close behind, its scaly brown thistles bursting with fluff.
- 3) The impenetrable density of the late summer Long Border. Salvias, Dahlias, Grasses, coppiced trees and robust shrubs are patched together with high-contrast impact in mind.





Meadow Management

The group work for September is meadow cutting. Once cut, we save strewings of wildflower seed for sale by donation to aspiring meadow-stewards on both public and private land. We rake off excess organic matter to discourage an increase in fertility, as many native wildflowers rely on poor soil to grow. This excess will be composted for later use in the garden beds, layered with high-nitrogen wool from the Dexter flock.



September Garden Visits

I spent much of September visiting local gardens and traveling away from Dixter for symposiums. Visits include The Beth Chatto Garden in Essex, Sissinghurst in Kent, RHS Wisley Botanic Garden, Knepp Wildlife Management Area and Bergamo, Italy for Valfredda Seminar.



Aug 31-Sept 2: Beth Chatto Symposium: "Rewilding the Mind"

A two-day symposia at the University of Essex featuring speakers such as Tom Stuart Smith, Sarah Price, John Little, and Great Dixter's Head Gardener, Fergus Garrett. Lecture topics included UK conservation ecology, biodiversity, design philosophies, global landscape architecture projects and, my favorite subject: The ongoing garden design industry debate of how best to approach maintenance practices for the contemporary aesthetic philosophy known as Naturalistic Planting Design.

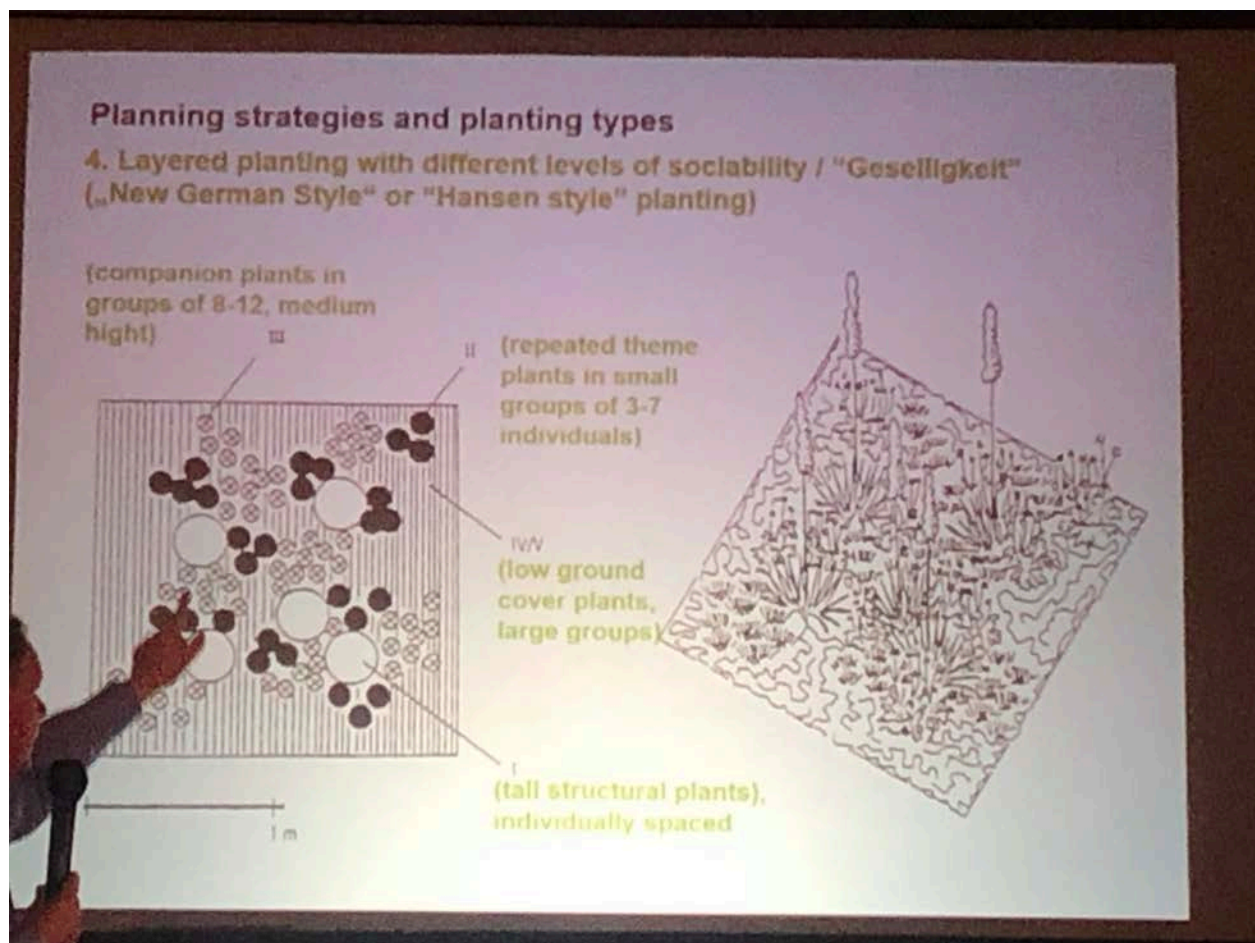


Sept 20-24 Bergamo, Italy— Valfredda Seminar

After two weeks of meadow cutting, late September brought the scholars (past and present) to Bergamo, Italy. Here we attended a four-day series of lectures, workshops, amazing food and gorgeous landscapes.

My second international plant conference felt like “Rewilding The Mind” part two. This time the lectures were less theoretical, more substantial. Actionable design strategies and time-tested case studies inspired candid conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of the Naturalistic design movement.

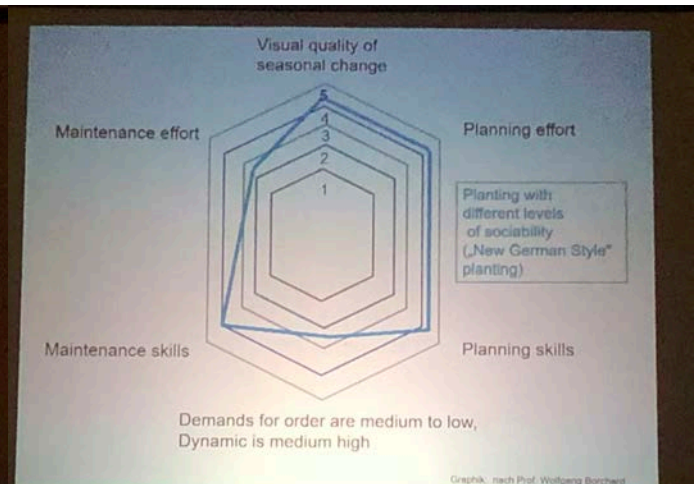
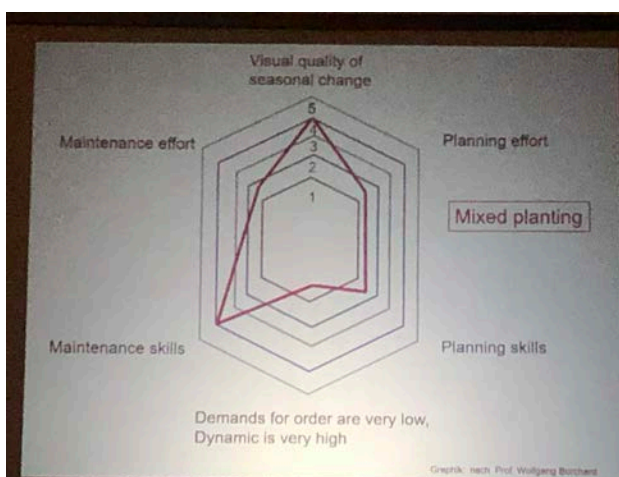
Noel Kingsbury, Annie Guilfoyle, Bettina Jaugstetter and Cassian Schmidt led a day-long Garden Masterclass workshop highlighting the more technical aspects of Naturalistic planting design. I was struck by the concise, organized way that these two Geisenheim University professors presented an instructional and replicable technical guide to the many different styles of Naturalistic planting design. Up until this point I had heard the Naturalistic design movement defined in terms of ideology, not viability. These lectures felt practical and concrete.



Cassian Schmidt took the time to discuss the challenges that Naturalistic planting design might present from a business perspective. He highlighted not only the profitability of initial project installation, but also the long-term viability of factors such as:

1. Nursery availability to reliably source plant material for large scale projects,
2. The importance of employing skilled maintenance professionals to maintain such projects, and
3. What is the overall visual impact of the final product? Which asks us the final question: Do the ends justify the means?

Here Cassian uses a 6-point graph to rate the overall impact (design output) and resources (design input) required for the optimal expression of many Naturalistic planting design styles: Mono planting, mixed planting, drift planting, mosaic planting, matrix schemes and the New German Style.



This presentation meant a lot to me. I felt inspired by the way that this group was able to communicate complex aesthetic theories in the most concise and digestible way possible.

The Garden Masterclass also included a plant tour of the Green Piazza installation designed by Cassian and Bettina's students. Here we learned about ancient Italian riparian ecosystems and the principles of Plant Sociability.

Later on, we broke off into groups to design our own Naturalistic landscapes. I chose to forego the temperate European plant palette provided in favor of a southeastern United States riparian plant palette that I was more familiar with.

The remainder of the conference depicted a diverse international representation of large scale landscape architecture projects, vibrant manifestos for new aesthetic movements, and a call to action for the sensitive responsibility of all land stewards, be they creators or conservationists.



Back to Dexter—At the end of the month, Fergus outlined the cycle of the gardening year, beginning with September. Unpredictable winter weather and the flexibility needed to make the best use of our labor was emphasized. Work for “dry days” and “wet days” were differentiated. We placed seed orders, discussed last year’s bedding displays, and began to clean out the cold frames for October seeding and propagation.