OCTOBER

October at Dixter, and I'm becoming increasingly embedded in my life here, in its unique rhythms and routines. As the month slips away, the season is turning. The woodlands are taking on their autumn skin. Reds and umbers and bright yellows glow in the landscape and the low light and punctuate the view across the Downs. We've had a lot of rain. The clocks have changed, and as ever, the sudden dark of the evenings comes as a shock to the antipodean in me.

The first weeks of the month, however, were bathed in sunlight, with great vast skies and the garden humming with insects. Throughout the garden, dahlias, cannas, symphyotrichum, and helianthus created rich waves of colour; the spectacular 'Giant Orange' tagetes in this year's hovel bedding showed no signs of abating (they're actually still doing pretty well as I write this). I was delighted to overhear some visitors murmur to each other how 'ghastly' the colour was.

October opened, too, with the Great Dixter Plant Fair, which took place on the weekend of the 6th to the 8th of October. On Friday evening, we listened to a fantastic, animated talk by Kevin Hughes, who spoke forcefully and passionately about gardening for biodiversity at Cally Gardens in Southwestern Scotland. Saturday and Sunday consisted of carparking shifts interspersed with wandering around the plant fair, listening to talks, and trying to resist the urge to buy too many plants. Particularly tempting, to my tastes, was Zophian plants, which specialises in drought tolerant perennials. For all that the gardens I've had here in England (in shared accommodation or appropriated from friends) have been on heavy clay, and often shady, something about the Capetonian in me yearns for the sun lovers and the desert dwellers. I came away with a *Berkheya purpurea*.

The weekend was one of warmth, enthusiasm, and conviviality: good conversations with so many lovely plant-y people, good weather, and good food. The best of the latter was a pit-roast deer, wrapped in bacon, fat, and banana leaves, and interred in a fire pit for 8 hours, before being exhumed to give staff, volunteers, and nursery folk an evening meal.

At the close of Plant Fair on Sunday evening, we undertook an impromptu trip to Dungeness to visit Prospect Cottage. I found it incredibly beautiful and somehow moving -- whether that was down to Derek Jarman, and all that queer beauty and sadness, or something in the sparseness of the place, the shapes of sea kale, shingle, scraggly roses, rust, and ageing wood. Or perhaps a bit of both. We arrived as the sun was sinking, and the whole of the Ness was drenched in vast golden light.

Work this month has been marked largely by coming to grips with my project. Each scholar at Dixter is assigned a specific area to look after, and along with Luke Senior, I've been entrusted with the care of the seedlings this year. We started out by sorting through all the seed collected or bought by Dixter over the past few years, listing them according to year for ease of reference. Then we were on to seed sowing -- poppies and sweet peas, and *Tolpis barbata.* Most of the seed we sow in autumn is that of hardy annuals. Once sown, our seed pots go into a double frame, which is checked daily for signs of germination. Germinating pots are then plucked from their comfortable abode and moved into a

greenhouse to keep growing for a bit until they are ready for pricking out. If left under the double lights for too long the seedlings become stretched as they reach for the sunlight. Once pricked out, seedlings go into a single-paned cold frame, where, hopefully, they will remain for the rest of the winter. These cold frames are chocked daily to allow airflow, and to prevent seedlings from growing too quickly and happily in their jammy lodgings. If they get too big, we have to pot them on again into bigger pots, which is ultimately an inefficient use of time and space.

It has been an eventful and perilous few weeks in the seedling world. In some of our initial efforts we buried the seeds too deeply, which meant the seedlings came up with a plate of soil on their heads. What's more, some mice greatly appreciated the feast of seed pots we presented to them in our cosy double frames, and we opened these in the morning to discover a carnage of pilfered pots. In retaliation, Luke and I constructed a mouse-proof seed cage, stretching rodent mesh wire over a wooden frame. This has proved very successful, but is now too small to house all the vulnerable seed pots, and so the mice have been feasting again. Most crushing, however, was the slug that decimated about a third of all our pricked out poppy seedlings. We'd been remiss in our routine scattering of organic slug pellets.

Seed sowing itself has been hugely interesting and enjoyable. Some of the seeds are truly beautiful, like those of *Artedia squamata,* which look like fat snowflakes, or of *Scabiosa atropurpurea*, which look like bits of coral, or like tiny shuttlecocks. It has been interesting to get a sense, through trial and error, of how densely to sow a pot. It's been baffling and frustrating that none of our Beth's Poppy has germinated. We've been quite excited by the single *Geranium maderense* that has.

The final weeks of October have passed in a slow and pleasant monotony of seed sowing and hedge cutting: mornings in the long shed sowing poppies and larkspur and silene, waiting for the hedges to dry and sheltering from the rain; afternoons on a ladder in the sun with the hum of hedgecutters and yew clippings in my eyes and down my shirt. As November creeps in, we still have a lot to sow, and we are now turning out attention to bulb planting.