Monthly Report October 2023 – Ernie

October:

Something I have always appreciated at Dixter is those little moments where we are encouraged to stop for a short period to take in and enjoy the garden, and so on Monday 2nd, we all started the day by walking around for 15 minutes as there was a heavy fog that had settled overnight. I remember that morning as another one of those magical Dixter moments, passing by others in the fog, bumping into Fergus who excitedly told me to go and see the peacock garden, and as I made my way there hearing him in the distance telling others again, go and see the peacock garden it's amazing! The peacock garden really was amazing, and it sparked the start of something I have been thinking a lot about throughout this month - The effect that different weather conditions and light levels have on the experience of a garden and how different colours, textures, and forms react to these conditions. One thing that stood out instantly on that Monday morning was the impact of the evening primroses, and how the usually more dominant aspect in this area, the Yew topiary, faded away in the background, highlighting other darker structures such as the Verbascum's and bringing the viewers focus much closer. Later in the month, I went out into the garden just as the sun was setting after some heavy rain and it again got me thinking, as the later it got, the fewer colours I could make out, and my focus switched more to shapes and textures.

- The Peacock Garden 02/10/23 -

- A view of the peacock garden from a ladder -

- My first time cutting one of the Topiary Peacocks -

Hedges: The majority of the meadows are now cut, and so we have swapped out pitchforks and power scythes for rakes and hedge cutters, to tackle this next big task before the bulk autumn/winter border work starts. A repeating theme of the learning so far has been about work balance and preparing for the seasons ahead, which includes assessing which tasks can be done sooner, to allow more time in the future for smaller, more creative tasks, or jobs that must be done at certain times of year. Hedges can be cut later but at Dixter we cut now in autumn as the growth has already stopped, to make time for those other tasks later. It's important to note that any of the hedges with fruits, such as rose hips are left for the wildlife as an important food source throughout the winter months. A section of hedge I particularly enjoyed cutting was the hedge in front of the Friends Office as it spans a wide area with a curved top sloping down towards the front. This involved cutting the top to create smooth rolling curves by leaving some areas longer than the previous cut, while not correcting it all in one year, as by cutting slightly higher for a few years makes it branch more, creating a denser hedge. The aim is often to cut the hedge precisely with crisp edges while being more sensitive to the areas that need adjusting or have weaker growth. This is definitely a skill that improves with time and practice, and I know both the other students and I have really enjoyed learning to cut the hedges so far.

- One of my favourite plants this month, Crataegus orientalis -

Great Dixter Plant Fair:

On Friday evening before the plant fair weekend Kevin Hughes from Cally Gardens gave an inspiring talk on biodiversity, during which he talked about how he manages his grassland areas, which really intrigued me. His approach is a random cut regime - some areas of grass get pulled up, some strimmed in winter, and some never get cut. It also involved disturbing the ground in areas and burning up to one-third in February. This creates a unique effect that supports a wide range of wildlife and often even improves the growth of plants that are inserted into the grassland such as peonies. I have found this grassland management idea fascinating and is something I will be doing more research into.

- On Sunday evening after the last day of the plant fair we were kindly invited to travel to Prospect Cottage with Derry Watkins, Tom Eaglestone, and Hester Forde -

Plant idents: This month the weekly Dixter plant idents have started up again, the first week was by Will Larson on asters, the second by me on ferns, and the third by Michael Morphy with a range of plants and explanations of what the Latin of each plant name meant. On the fourth week is a test of 10 plants chosen at random from across all 3 weeks. Ferns in particular are a passion of mine and I felt very grateful to spend time with Julian Reed over the plant fair weekend, who very kindly took time Saturday evening to help me identify nearly all of the ferns at Dixter, which greatly helped with my ident the next week where I enjoyed sharing this knowledge with others.

Other jobs this month included increasing our Libertia ixioides stock, potting up Gladioli for next year's pot displays, organising this year's bulb order ready for planting at both Dixter and the Silk Route garden at Woolbeding, autumn seed sowing and pricking out, some new planting in the high garden and digging out two large Phyllostachys nigra 'Boryana' which had been at here for over 50 years. (Both flowered and died earlier in the year. Bamboos exhibit gregarious flowering, where many/all those of the same species or clone flower at the same time regardless of location)

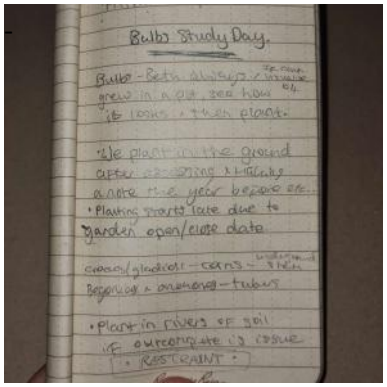
Will and I worked on the Libertia ixioides, dividing larger potted plants down to mostly two fan splits, cutting the leaves and roots back and potting into 9cm pots. By observing splits from the year before it was clear that the plants in a grittier mix performed much better, while the others had rotted off, so this year we potted them all with more grit into the smaller pots to reduce the chance of them rotting over winter. We then lined them out into Will's cold frames, where he will regulate the temperature and ventilation, and keep watering to a minimum. Controlling the environment in the cold frames is a great skill to learn and is especially crucial for the autumn-sown hardy annuals here at Dixter, as it allows us to take the pressure off the work in spring, by making the most of the warmth at the end of the year to germinate seeds under two layers of glass, then pricking them out into module trays or 'small blacks' (9cm pots) and moving them under one layer of glass to protect the fragile seedlings while they grow on before the cold weather sets in. It involves a careful balance with the timing and weather to have enough warmth to germinate and keep the seedlings growing a little after pricking out, but then keeping them cool enough to slow growth right down, so we can keep them in the modules, or small containers over winter.

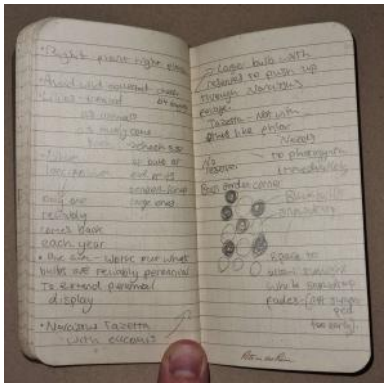
- Pictured right: Pricking out Ammi majus and Papaver commutatum 'Lady Bird' -

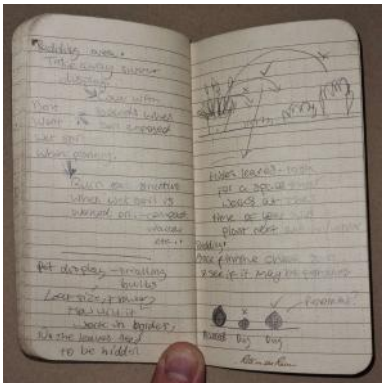
Bulbs Study Day:

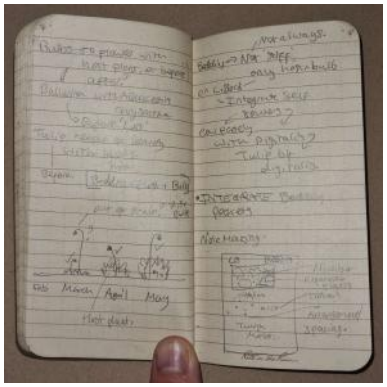
- Pictured right: A planting plan using canes to mark out the bed, different sized pots as permanent plants, and bulbs running through the spaces. A key lesson was showing us how to integrate bulbs into a border without too much foliage competition. Changing how you plant according to the different plants needs or growth habits and planning for the later seasons after the bulbs finish. Planting bulbs with high/low density to create a more naturalistic flow -

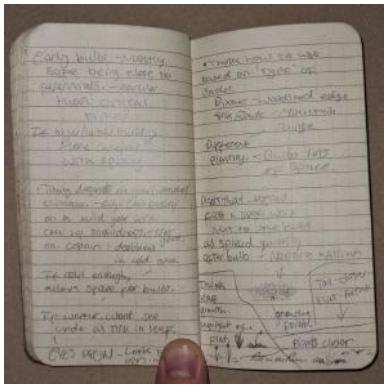
During this study day we learned how to use bulbs in bedding areas, permanent plantings, pots and meadows. Fergus also explained the importance of note-taking during the bulb's main season and assessing the merits of weaknesses of bulbs to improve the display year after year. Below are some of the notes I wrote during the day:

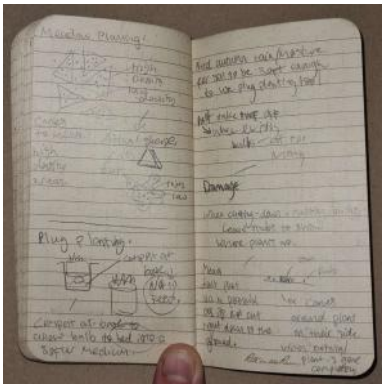


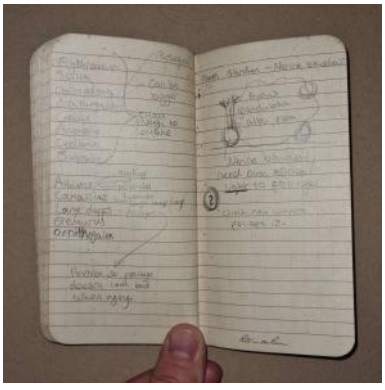


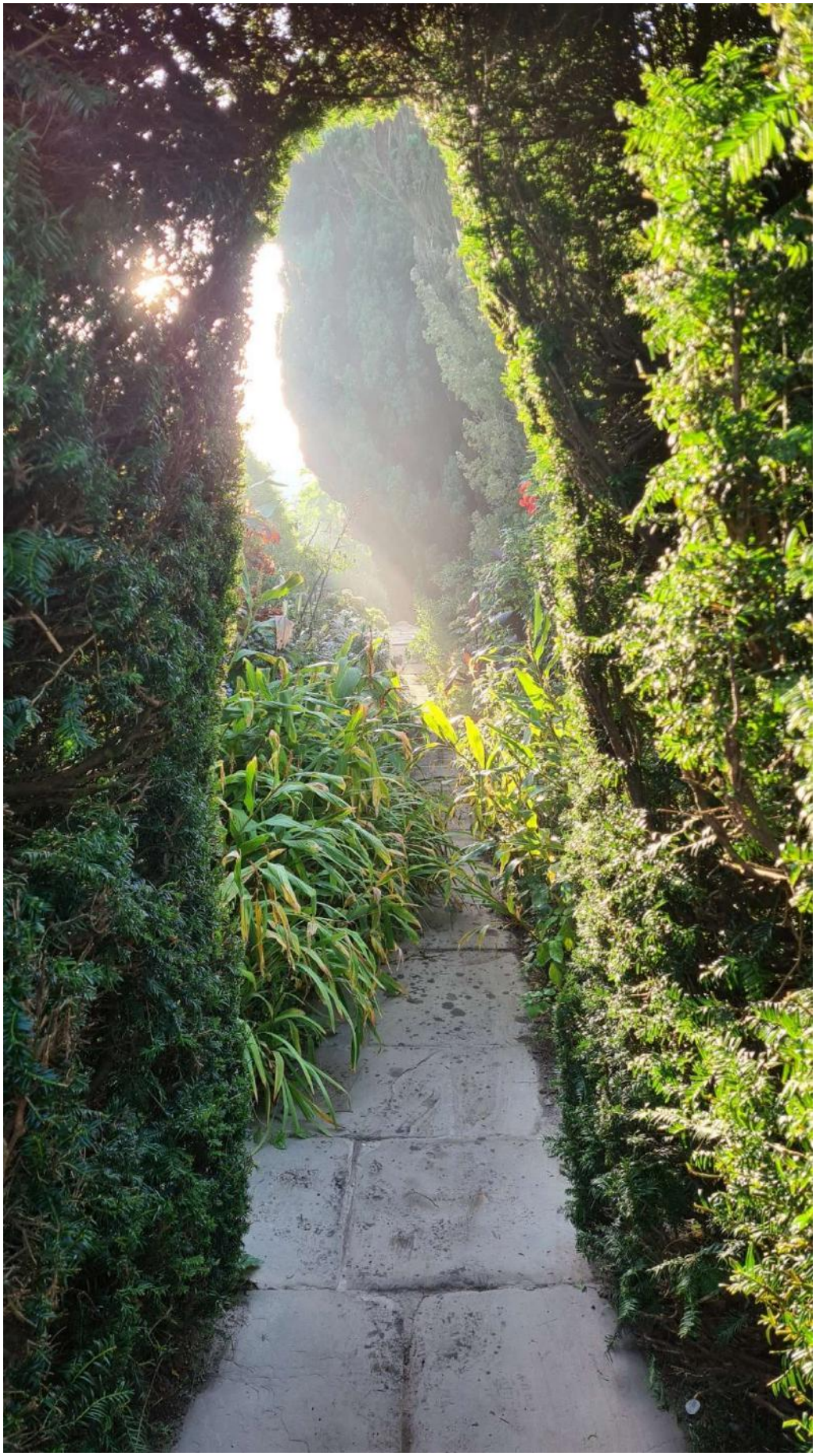












- Ernie Weller