

Rick Mather David Scrase Christopher Lloyd Scholar October 2023

There's a sense of familiarity around October but I see it from the view of the new students. I have a different role now and that is to guide them in the familiar processes that are all too crucial at this time of year. There is plenty of detail work still to be carried out although the garden is creeping into its more grizzly, five o'clock shadow form. We still dead head, tidy the paths and weed that which need wed, but we are less precious, less formal in maintaining the informality of the space. It is the gardens final song, welcoming the change of hue, the transition to seed head and the opening up of spaces. It is also a good time to really see into some of the spaces of the garden to make assessments and decisions as to how the display has been, does it show weakness, need adaptation, marking the pros and cons. Where can we add late interest or adjust a group so that the window of interest becomes more varied and layered. It is all a big dose in learning how to observe and how to make judgments based on that. One observation that I would like to attend to at somepoint this year is the upper orchard stock bed' late season display. This year gone we plugged the gaps with *Salvia* 'Rambo Red', which has a very vibrant primary red flower, but against all the browning *Cynara* & *Verbascum* it looked quite bizarre. The browns stole the show and the red ended up looking plonked in, fairly unnatural. Later season yellows and pastel colours would suit better in there, perhaps some *Verbena* & *Tagetes*.

The first cut of the meadow has reached an end, with detailing and finessing of those more tricky bits under trees and around hedges being the final straw. Not soon had this finished that the favourable weather chimed in and left a few days at the end of the month where suitable cutting did return to reduce the nutrient level of the meadow down again as well as reducing the height of the grasses so as to give the germinating seedlings a little more light to get up and out of the shade. That is of more importance than anything so that these young seedlings are in with a chance against our ever-growing native grasses. I have found it very interesting to better understand the prairie meadow at the top of Great Dixter, where Christo had tried to develop a thicker sward of American prairie plants. Unfortunately for us, these plants are so successful in their native habitat as the grasses don't outcompete them in the winter...unlike our varieties, which keep on growing and eventually push these exotic species to their demise.

The project Ernie and I have been given in the "Lower Car Park" is coming together quite nicely. I am a keen one for the organisation of a set space, taking care to clean up the plants, create order of the stock; separating those that are for different uses and creating a stock list to inform the nursery of our numbers so that we can keep plants moving for sale. We have to keep in mind if we have a good expression of the plant in the garden, do we have a stock plant and do the nursery have/need any. We propagate certain material for the nursery for various training reasons with students, if the nursery doesn't have time to keep up with demand and because it helps us to manage the stock that we have in the garden; e.g. if it is a rare or choice plant that we are in need of building. There are

many conversations with the nursery as we try to keep material moving along the conveyor belt, juggling numbers, requirements and if we should keep a set number back for use later in the season. Its much more of a logistical system than I had given it credit and I don't think it'll be crystal clear anytime soon. There is still a lot of work to be done, changes to be made, cold frames to be built and stock to move out into the garden/nursery. As I spend more time thinking about it and working in the space I am conscious that our role has lots of room for development and is one that will benefit both Ernie and myself with a solid skillset in managing stock, not just within the standing out area but also within the garden and the nursery. On top of this as well is the bonus of getting to know the plants more intimately. It is important for us to be able to produce true cultivars, not only for ourselves but also for the nursery to sell. *Crocoshia* for instance has heavy seeds that fall off back into the crown of a plant and then produce new, hybridised seedlings that will vary slightly from the said variety, making them useless for named sale of a plant. Not only then are we to manage the stock in the standing out area, but also we must be vigilant on instances like this taking place as it could jeopardize the whole operation.

We had a highly successful plant fair with many attending, not only the fair but the volunteer side as well. I took on the role of coordinating the volunteers, organising rotas and making sure their day and their roles ran smoothly. It is not too far outside roles I have done in the past within the hospitality trade, but it was different. Different in that there were more people to manage and ensuring that their interactions with their roles and the visitors was smooth. I had a lot of thanks over that role but really it was down to having a superb team that made it run so smoothly. I wouldn't take the credit for it because the actual running of the weekend was so dependant on having a keen group of individuals who want to be part of the whole weekend. So to them I am thankful. As always with all the people that come to Great Dixter, you really see the joy that the volunteers have in being at the garden, seeing the plant fair and interacting with each other. It's the life force of the garden. It exists because of the people and the enthusiasm of the people exists because of the garden. Then again, it all exists because of Christopher Lloyd so I'll extend my thanks to him too. I am sure he would be proud of what the garden has become and the community it encompasses.

We went in the horse pond. Right up to our ribs, through the thick sludge to clear away the *Pontederia* & *Typha*, two species which encroach quite drastically across the pond, taking all available space and crowding out the *Nympaea*. We left two small islands of the monocots for nesting birds and within a week the pond was flooded with ducks all getting acquainted with the new islands, safe from the leap of a curious fox. Now the water has settled and risen a little with the rain, the Horse Pond looks quite spectacular, dark and mysterious with the glistening cordate leaves and the reflection of an autumnal *Taxodium*. All the material that was removed from the pond went up to the compost heap. The injection of nitrogen caused the heap to sink drastically, but now around the edges of the heap we see the new shoots of those that we removed.

Something I really enjoy about the work at Great Dixter is the fluidity in Fergus' training. He is a man of observation and encourages you to take note of your

surroundings. Last year I was quite set on having a summer cutting and winter cutting soil mix. This year when we were taking cuttings we had a large discussion around the quality of the mix and the importance of getting our hands in the medium to feel for a consistency that will have a higher success rate. We always have the freedom to experiment here and ask questions. Each result gives us a better understanding of the horticultural setting, slowly moulding us to observe, play, assess and question our surroundings. We had a large walk around the garden towards the end of October. The whole team gathered to look and assess areas, noting weaknesses and ways we can develop. The crossroads in the High Garden were one of these and after much discussion we had decided to take various cuttings of important species (including shoot and roots to assess viability), moving certain varieties to add continuity in the area, planting new species and completely revamping other areas. This soon turned into a whole days work but it is a moment that is likely to change the whole display for next season. Not only this but it brought the team together, to discuss and question our understanding of a space, encouraging the new students to input ideas and allow us all to benefit from the new injection of enthusiasm.

Rob Leonard Flack.