

Christopher Lloyd Scholarship report – September

My first month at Great Dixter as the Christopher Lloyd Scholar is one that I definitely won't forget. It had taken me three years to finally get here and I know that my failures in succeeding then, only further encouraged me to pursue a path that has finally led me here. It has been worth the wait and it feels an absolute honour to have been offered the position at Great Dixter. I would firstly like to extend my thanks for all the support in funding the role. I already know from this first month, that it will be the most beneficial step in my horticultural career. The mentality, ethos, knowledge and history of the garden are so strong to aid in guiding me into a progressive, forward thinking role on completion. To be here is truly and honour and I am incredibly grateful.

My first month has included such a range of tasks that have been surrounded by insightful conversations, logical explanations, comparisons, expertise and enthusiasm. One of the most beneficial of these was to see Fergus' yearly plan and how the garden will function over my time here. I've never worked in a garden before that has been so well thought out and needed to be, the results of this are clearly extraordinary. We also began this month with meadow maintenance, cutting, raking and clearing the strewing's so that they could be used to acquire donations to further run the garden. One of the many sustainable ways that Great Dixter works to ensure that its history is forthcoming and the education can continue. With this is the additional strewing's that go on the compost heap and how to manage the size of it, whilst ensuring that the best temperature can be reached to kill off weed seeds. So far the compost heap has reached over 80°C. Outstanding really! The interest I find here is that beneficial bacteria are killed off but as the heap cools; the bacteria at the peripheral edges of the heap gradually work their way back into the centre by multiplying every 15 minutes. In turn this creates very diverse, healthy compost that goes on to feed the diversity above ground. I find it incredibly interesting in terms of its science and also its historic methodology.

I have been designated the Exotic Garden as my area to maintain first thing in the morning. This covers a general tidy up as well as tying in, pruning, staking and observing. This is probably the key to my experience here and something that I have begun to learn how to do better within my morning routine. From here I see now that the Exotic Garden is less about combinations of plants and particular species such as it is in other areas of the garden. Here it is more about the playfulness of plants, experimenting with light and how being completely absorbed in an environment encourages a different emotional response than other areas of the garden. To take yourself away and be transported, to experience and discover what it makes you feel. The tactility of this space is all the more to aid with this as it encourages you as a viewer to really get involved and understand that gardens can be more than a canvas we look at. It's a reminder that we are as much a part of the nature that we step into.

I have also been to a Landscape Architect conference in Bergamo, Italy. What an absolute treat! A very insightful experience that allowed me to become immersed

in the landscape architecture world. From master classes, one to ones, lecture, tours and a good bit of networking. It was one of those events that I know will have great reciprocal advantages. The lectures were very broad and very interesting, covering big projects, community projects, theoretical thinking of how we assess plants and of course a good view on peoples horticultural passions. It was great to see so much variety and get a grasp of what's going on and what's possible.

Returning to Great Dixter has seen me taking cuttings and propagating from seed. A practical skill I was vaguely familiar with but one that has needed great development. As a result I was also designated the seed frames with my morning routines. This has meant to monitor seed germination rates, watering and assessing the correct time to move them into the glasshouse so that the seeds don't get too leggy. The germination of the seeds has allowed me to see my faults in seed propagation almost instantly. I would call it instant karma. The seeds can be a little unforgiving if you don't treat them how they like to be treated. We have recently been working through our hardy annual seed lists to include those that were saved and ordering those for next year. These are the seeds we've been sowing and maintaining. I've already gained valuable lessons in how to sow seed, learning from my mistake as well as how particular plants play a role in the garden and why we use them. A trait that I think is key to a gardener's success as a progressive thinker and one I am all the more happy to learn since being here. I shall be excited to further see the results of the seed germination after they have been pricked out and grown on. All so I can better understand their practical uses. I've learnt at Great Dixter that everything feeds into and off one another. It's highly organic.

We are also at the time of year to cut the hedges. Important in this is why we do them now and that is so we have time to make best use of the winter for deconstructing the garden. The aim is to essentially get ahead of schedule so we can be more productive with design and propagation for the following year. Now the hedges; never have I so enjoyed cutting a hedge in my life. The organic free-flowing structure of them allows you to have some artistic license in the cutting and it feels more like sculpting the hedge cutting. Fergus and Michael have been crucial in my understanding of the best ways to cut the hedge, ensuring that they are cut to the right level to give the best impact but also maintain the health and vigour of each *Taxus*, which was grown from seed. Of interest here for me is how each specimen is slightly different in its habit. Some grow down, some grow up, some bushy, some thin and each metre of hedge is very different from the last. It all makes for not only a diverse structure but also one that is a pleasure to work with and observe. I think if I can cut hedges here then I can cut hedges anywhere. They are complex, interesting, mature and insightful. We have also this week just finished the peacocks. A great joy to cut but also daunting enough that you have to keep your wits about you. God forbid a slip and the garden becomes haunted by the headless peacock. They are much trickier than the hedges as their details are much finer. It's been a real lesson in learning how to fine-tune my movements with the hedge cutters so as to give the tightest angles some clarity and definition. Alas, we have been praised on our work but I put that down to the expertise of the team and how it should be done to achieve such effects.

To top off this first chunk of my training was the autumn plant fair. What an absolute hoot. It was great to meet a broad range of growers, students, professionals and volunteers. Volunteering at the plant fair last October was partly the reason for me getting the role of the Christopher Lloyd Scholar. So it was great to meet that next generation of curious horticulturalists, eager to get their foot in the door and see what it's all about. I enjoyed sharing with them what I've been doing in this first month, how the garden works and the benefit of being here. Long live education! I see the enthusiasm in those that I had then and they see it in me now, wishing to know what's behind the door.

I hope this report has given you some insight into my time here so far. To say the least, it's been incredible!!! I can't believe how much I am learning on a daily basis. There is always an interesting conversation, task or plant where ever I turn and I feel blessed to be completely submerged in the beauty of this place. I'm only too sad that a month has whizzed by already but there is joy in knowing that the next month will be completely different from the last and the one before it. So I move forward with great enthusiasm to continue my training at Great Dixter. To be observant, optimise my time, be flexible and learn how to adapt my forward thinking to the rhythm of the garden. Once again thank your help! It's a dream come true and I couldn't be happier.

With kind regards and humble gratitude,

Rob Leonard Flack.