SEPTEMBER

I've been at Dixter for a month now, and it still feels a little surreal. Reading back through my notes, it's remarkable how nervous I was in the build up to coming here, feeling out of my depth and unsure of what to expect. There's certainly still some of that -- my fellow scholars all seem very knowledgeable and experienced, and I'm struck time and again by gaps in my own knowledge. Yet from the moment I arrived I've been made to feel so welcome, and the warmth and generosity with which we've all been received has surprised and heartened me. I've felt instantly at ease. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the entire Dixter team for this welcome, and to everyone who has made it possible for me to be here.

The garden itself has been magical. Even late in the season, it is a welter of colour, form, and texture. Each day, every change in the weather or in the light, every corner turned reveals something new, a colour combination or a little vignette I hadn't noticed before. Each day after work, I wander around the garden drinking it in, looking up plants I don't know, noting the planting combinations, and occasionally being trapped by Neil, the Dixter cat.

The learning, too, has been an overwhelming and exciting inundation. This first month, we've done a lot of meadow work -- cutting, raking, and bagging up grasses and wildflowers gone to seed from the orchard meadow, the topiary lawn, and other patches of grassland scattered around Dixter. Fergus explained to us how the best time to cut a meadow for strewing is in fact before the seedheads fully ripen, as this means you carry away more seed on the stalks, which can then ripen and drop when strewed in a new location. However, this doesn't allow for much seeding on the existent meadow, and so for our meadow maintenance at Dixter we cut after the seed has ripened, allowing some to fall on site, and carrying some of it away to strew on a new field. We did this with some of the clippings from around the horse pond, where the meadow is rich in autumn hawkbit, strewing them onto the topiary lawn and the orchard garden, which should hopefully help to establish hawkbit in those areas.

It was fascinating to be shown the contrast between different patches of meadow, resulting from differences in history or topography -- where there used to be an old compost heap, for example, or a bonfire, the grass is far more lush, outcompeting the wildflowers. Under the trees, too, the clippings are less good, as the falling leaves add too many nutrients to the soil, allowing grasses to dominate. Clippings from these areas went on the compost heap, which is in itself a structure to behold! We piled the clippings on in layers, working from one end to another, and trying keeping the shape square (grass is draped slightly over the edges to keep them straight and firm). We also added a layer of sheep's wool (for additional nitrogen), stretching it out thinly with our hands. The smell of the lanolin was lovely.

In some ways, this theme of nutrient density characterised a lot of my learning this month -- how it builds up, how we can manage it as gardeners, and which plants we can expect to see at different nutrient levels. These considerations informed much of our 'crack gardening' this month, by the ticket office, on Christo's terrace, and on the kitchen drive, where Michael Wachter explained Grime's triangle to us. The gist of it was that in an area where the build-up of organic matter gradually increases the nutrient levels in the soil, certain competitor plants will eventually outcompete their neighbours and dominate that area, unless we intervene. And so, on the kitchen drive, we combed through the gravel, removing the rampant clover, plantains, and grasses, and carefully saving the ox-eye daisies, dandelions, and especially the tiny grass-like seedlings of the beautiful *Dierama pulcherrimum,* or Angel's fishing rod. I loved the attention and care with which we treated each little pavement crack or patch of gravel, looking at it as though through a magnifying glass, and editing it accordingly. Also exciting are the things that might grow in the cracks

-- woad and *Eryngium giganteum* to be sowed on Christo's terrace, along with perhaps creeping thymes as plug plants; and for the ticket office, verbascums and hollyhocks.

On a larger scale, we waded into the horse pond. Here too, the build up of organic matter is becoming problematic, and narrow reedmace (*Typha angustifolia)* chokes up the entire pond. Here we were not called to any microscopic editing, but to lug away as much 'biomass' as possible, in Michael's terms. And 'mass' is right: it was heavy work, digging up and slinging about wet, muddy plant matter, and carting it off to the compost heap. That being said, I highly rate the camaraderie (and comedic value) of a pondbound herd of muddy, smelly gardeners, kitted out in waders and shoulder length yellow gloves.

Amidst all of this, hedge cutting season has begun. This is a task I thoroughly enjoy. Perhaps it appeals to my slightly obsessive side. The hedges here are old, so we treat them with respect, following their organic ebb and flow, lines sagging a little here and there, like the lines of the roofs around them. In places, we'll cut a little less hard, leaving things softer, so that a few years' cutting might even out some of the imbalances and blend together some of the more extreme undulations. But (and this seems to be the way with a lot of things at Dixter) it is a sensitive and attentive process, responsive to each individual plant and the way it wants to grow, and mindful of how our actions today might ripple on into the future.

Seedheads of autumn hawkbit and yellow rattle in the meadow around the horse pond, and dried flowers outside the gardeners' mess room

The kitchen drive, with structural seedheads of giant fennel, and the compost heap covered in wool