

## September 2023 Report

Will Larson – Chanticleer USA Christopher Lloyd Scholar



**From left to right:** Naciim Benkreira, Ruth Boran scholar, Will Larson, Chanticleer USA scholar, and Matt Padbury, Adam Greathead scholar, at the chalk cliffs in Le Tréport, on a garden trip in Normandy, France. (Photo by Christopher Lloyd scholar Ernie Weller)

I arrived at Great Dixter on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023, in the midst of a weeklong British heatwave. With temperatures hovering around 80° F, the late afternoons were particularly long and beautiful, and the garden is completely filled with plants spilling out of the beds and borders. I've particularly enjoyed exploring the garden in the evenings when the sun gets low and sets behind the house, lighting up the *Miscanthus* plumes in the Peacock Garden. September is a month for tidying up around the garden, with particular focus on cutting meadows and hedges, as well as weeding and shifting plants to get reorganized the garden closes at the end of October.

### Meadows

Our work on the meadows began in the orchard, working as a team to cut and bag the high-quality hay to be used for strewing, diversifying other meadows with the seed-filled green mulch. The timing for the first cutting of the meadows is late, and dependent on the seed ripening of select species such as Autumn's Hawksbit (*Scorzonoides autumnale*) and the Common Spotted orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuschii*). The meadow is first rough cut with a walk-behind repeating scythe, followed behind by a team of gardeners with wooden hay rakes, which are far lighter and more comfortable than their modern metal counterparts. Hay forks are used to flake the cuts into small piles to be collected by large woven pallet totes. The hay

bags are then loaded onto the large tractor trailer and moved off of the meadow. A second, closer cut is achieved with a ride-on lawnmower, which bags the finer trimmings and creates an ideal open environment greater germination.

The meadow will be cut a second time in a month or two. For now, we have rotated through different sections of the garden cutting meadows based on priority: the orchard, the topiary lawn, the horse pond, and then to the prairie. Areas lower in plant diversity or with lower quality hay are composted, while high-diversity cuttings are used for strewing, evenly spread out by hand.



Naciim and Fergus carrying a bag to be used for collecting meadow cuttings with a hay fork.





Christopher Lloyd scholar Talitha Slabbert cutting the tail of a peacock into the yew hedge in the Peacock Garden.

### **Hedges**

A major focus at this time of year is hedge cutting, which helps create tighter lines and more aesthetic structure in the garden. Having clear lines in the garden helps counterbalance the kind of “fuzz” created by the abundance of vegetation everywhere. The yew hedges are cut once a year and clipped fairly close on account of their age and size. Electric hedge cutters allow for more maneuverable clipping on the somewhat organic and oscillating forms of the hedges. Tripod ladders (as seen in the picture above) are very useful for giving access to the hard-to-reach tops and sides of the hedges. Hedges are generally cut in teams of three or four gardeners on a three-day rotation.

### **Carpark clean-out**

As we anticipate pulling the beds apart and fall planting after the garden closes at the end of October, September is an important time for taking stock of what plants we have and where they should be. For much of the month, this involved weeding out our holding areas for potted plants and relabeling them.



Weeding in the carpark on a particularly wet day: upturned tree pots and good organization are key.





A yellow *Oenothera* species pokes through *Symphyotrichum* 'Little Carlow'. The small white flowers in foreground are *Erigeron annuus*; the finer, smaller periwinkle aster behind 'Little Carlow' on the right side is *Symphyotrichum cordifolium* 'Elegans', with *S. laeve* 'Arcturus' bringing up the rear.



### Asters, asters, asters

The North American asters (particularly the genus *Symphyotrichum*) come into their own in September, and their blooms in the Peacock Garden have been building into a great blue and purple crescendo. It is unusual for me to see so many asters out of their wild context, as I am used to seeing them in natural areas throughout New England. I lead an aster identification session (an 'Ident') to explore these great plants in more detail and draw some attention to their finer morphological features. I particularly like the pairings of lemon yellows with the cool periwinkle and lavender blues of the asters, which really saturate with intense color in the dusk right after the sun has set. *Oenothera* and *Solidago* both provide a nice yellow counterpoint to the sea of blue. I also enjoyed finding the Sea Aster, *Tripolium pannonicum*, growing wild in the salt flats at the Rye Harbour Nature Preserve.



*Tripolium pannonicum*, with its beautiful blue-gray foliage.





The Autumn Garden at Le Jardin Plume looks stunning in late September.



### A trip to France

I helped organize a group of four garden scholars to take a weekend trip to drive deep into the agricultural heartland of Normandy, France, for a visit to Le Jardin Plume. The Autumn Garden was particularly explosive, with a wonderful mixture of different grasses and airy plants dominating the garden room enclosed by a tall hedge.



A photo from the “Sound Matters” event in the Great Hall, a new ongoing project at Great Dixter composed of a narrative soundscape of the garden and its gardeners.

I have particularly enjoyed the morning ritual of sweeping and light editing of brown plant stems in sections of the garden. I am learning to look more closely at plantings and think about what is or is not working in a specific area, and I keep my small notebook in my breast-pocket at all times for taking notes and thinking ideas out on paper. I’m looking forward to digging deeper into the underlying structure of the garden and how it all works together as we transition toward the garden’s close.



A skeleton of Giant Fennel (*Ferula communis*) wonderfully towering over the High Garden at Dixter.

