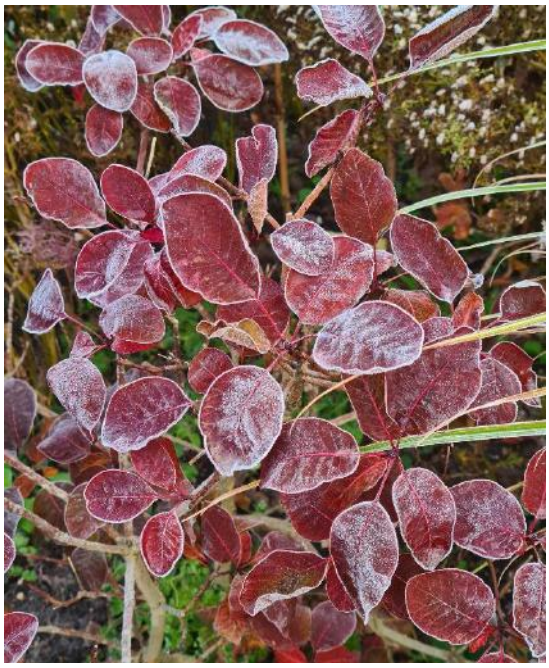
Monthly Report December 2023 – Ernie Weller

December started with good frost that had settled across the entire garden, highlighting the shapes of leaves and bringing fresh, crisp air, making it finally seem a bit more like winter. We had spent the day before in the Old Rose Garden wrapping the banana plants, *Musa basjoo*, so this was timed just right. We wrap the bananas here at Dixter in a sort of tepee style, using old twine to tie together tall bamboo canes that point inwards towards the top, and filling the structure with our hay from the meadows. This protects the tall pseudostem throughout the winter, maintaining the plants' height for the next growing season.



- Frosted leaves of Cotinus coggygria -

- Frosted leaves of …… -

- The Topiary Lawn and Upper Moat -

- Banana plants wrapped in hay, in the Old Rose Garden -

- A view of the Long Border 01/12/23 -

Through December we had some bulbs still to get in the ground, which for me involved planting Tulipa White Triumphator in the Long Border, Tulipa turkestanica in a few spots at the front of the house, Narcissus Thalia at the end of the Kitchen Drive, Tulipa saxatilis in the Cat Garden ledge, Narcissus Brackenhurst and Allium White Giant in the Blue Garden conifer bed, and Tulipa Ad Rem in the Hovel bedding.

<u>The main aims for December written in my notebook were:</u>
- Cut back foliage for early emerging bulbs
- Finish cutting hedges
- Bulbs in pots
- Bulbs in bedding
- Bulbs in permanent areas
- Pricking out
- Keep seedlings 'snug' (really important to get some good growth before winter sets in)

<u>Planting the Hovel Bedding:</u>
Before planting the Hovel Bedding, the work involves removing the previous bedding plants and working the soil. Whenever working on soil, we use wooden boards to distribute our weight and reduce compaction, so the day before we laid flat plyboards all around the bedding area, to reduce damage to the lawn. While working on the beds we are taught to use planks or scaffold boards to walk or kneel on. The previous bedding plants included cannas, which are best dug up and protected over winter, although some can survive if left out we remove them anyway as they are used in bedding areas that need changing. The cannas are dug up carefully to not damage the rhizomes as this can promote rot during storage. We remove the soil from the rhizomes and fit as many plants as we can into reused polystyrene boxes, and just cover with slightly damp old soil, (a similar method to storing root veg in sand) then store them in a cool dark place until spring. Once all the plants are removed, we single dig the whole bed, which aerates the soil and makes an easier medium to plant in, as well as making sure all of last year's bulbs have been removed. For the displays we plant right up to the edges, so it's important to dig directly under the edge of the path next to the bedding pocket, to create enough room for the roots of these plants. Our host plants for the area are Lychnis coronaria and Anthriscus sylvestris Ravenswing. Fergus taught us a lesson about spacing the plants as with Lychnis in particular he has observed they can push out other companion plants when planted too closely, so we carefully laid all the plants out and planted at a wider distance, and then followed these with Tulipa Ad Rem in between. The choice of tulip and planting layout is important to get right in a spot like the Hovel bedding as it is often first seen from a distance, so it needs to make a big impact. T. Ad Rem is a large red, yellow-edged Darwin Hybrid tulip so should make quite a show.
One thing I love about gardening is how I will always be able to experiment and learn, as even with a task I now feel more familiar with like doing this bedding, there will always be different plants that need different requirements. I get to think ahead about designs, watch and observe how they play out over the growing season, and how they react to different conditions. Dixters style of bedding really excites the design side of me as it's a bit like planning a big painting but with plants, trying different colours, shapes and forms together and thinking about the different angles or distances it will be experienced from while never quite knowing how the plants are going to grow together, and ultimately being at the mercy of the weather as to whether it works at all. When it does work it makes it all the more satisfying. I again want to take this moment to thank everyone in Club 22 who has made it possible for me to be here, able to experiment and learn in such a special place.

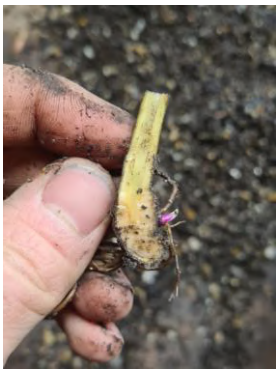
In order to get some of the last tulips in the permanently planted areas like the stock beds in the peacock garden, we needed to do some 'border work' before it was ready for planting. So for a couple of days in the middle of December, I worked with a team on the Aster Bed, tying up grasses, cutting back perennials and marking them out with canes on the ground. At this stage, we also remove any overly invasive plants, make changes to the design and dig up plants to take more stock from, as well as plan and make improvements to the layers of planting by adding other plants under trees and shrubs. In the Aster Bed, we planted more primulas and hellebores under the Physocarpus shrubs to improve the spring display. After the bulk of the border work is done we then carefully plant in between the groups of perennials with Myosotis and 'self sowers' such as teasels and evening primroses, and then finally, the tulips after these.

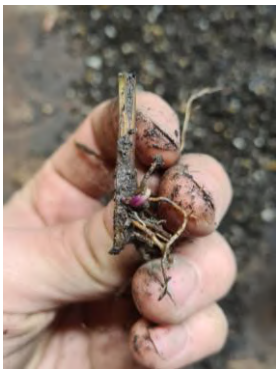
Before the holiday break, other jobs included cutting back foliage of plants such as ferns and hellebores to make way for emerging flowers, processing the plants from the stock beds by splitting them up to produce large numbers of each plant, potting up bulbs in pots for next years pot displays, potting up bulbs for the Silk Route garden, taking the tips off of sweet peas to encourage branching, and planting a Cedrus atlantica Glauca in the Cat Garden.

- Border work in the Aster Bed -

- Cedrus atlantica Glauca in the Cat Garden -

<u>Stem Splitting Asters from the Aster Bed in the Peacock Garden:</u>





- The team walking the Long Border on a frosty morning -

- Amazing sunset on our last day of work in 2023 -

- Ernie Weller