November Report

Time is passing so quickly at Dixter, and November has come and gone. The garden is shut to the public, and the days now are spent preparing for the new year. The weather is turning grey and wet. The sunken garden has been flooded, and the woods that earlier this month were full of mushrooms are becoming bare. I'm becoming blissfully accustomed to Dixter, the work and the people here, and the endless, luxurious stimulation of the garden. Yet at the same time, within these happy rhythms, I often have to pinch myself, and marvel in disbelief and gratitude that I actually get to be here, and to learn and work in this strange and wonderful place.

The main thrust of work this month has been deconstructing the garden, stripping back the growth of the summer to reveal the framework beneath. This has involved some really interesting bed work, and including learning to work from long scaffolding boards within the beds. There's some real strategy at work here, as the boards need to be laid out so as not to damage the plants, so as to minimise any stepping onto the bare soil, and so that they can be easily cleaned off and shifted aside when the bulbs need to go in. The stripping back itself is hugely satisfying. In areas of permanent planting, we cut back the perennials, marking the outlines of their groups with bamboo canes laid on the ground. These visual aids allow us to assess the planting, distilled down to geometric shapes. It becomes much easier to see when a group of plants is getting too big and needs splitting, or if conversely it is too small and needs bulking up. The spaces between these caned-out clumps are then scattered through with self sowers and bulbs. Throughout the garden, we have been digging up cannas and dahlias and tender salvias, storing tubers in the cellar and potting up the salvias to wait out the winter in one of the greenhouses. Bedding pockets are stripped and dug over (taking care to save self-sown honesty, forget-me-nots, and evening primrose), and then planted up with spring flowering biennials. We plant these relatively evenly across each bedding pocket, aiming for a uniform distribution, but still trying to add a natural, random touch, placing some plants closer together and others further apart. These bedding pockets are then run through with spring flowering bulbs, laid out in rivers and sweeps and organic shapes ('make it look like psoriasis,' Fergus might say, or 'like a squashed frog').

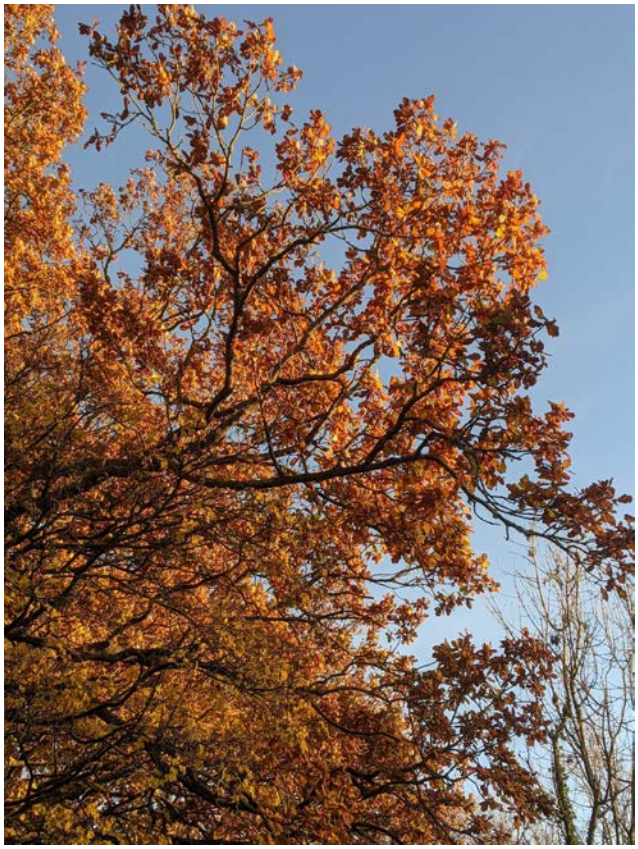
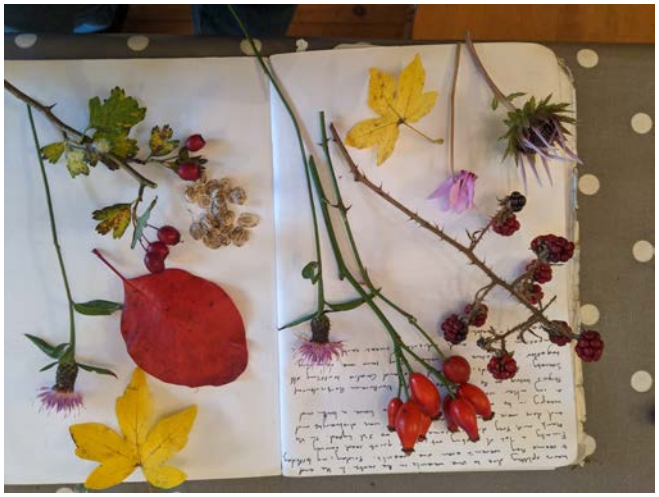
This bed work has felt like excellent visual training. It has forced me to think about different angles of approach and what perspectives a piece of planting will be viewed from. It has made me think about the different weights we might want as we scatter plants across an area -- big blobs of colour and little spatters-- and how to carry the eye from the front to the back of the border, or to draw it across a path from one bed to another. I've also enjoyed learning the subtly different visual styles and different bulb planting approaches between the fairly uniform and densely planted bedding pockets and the more open textured planting of permanent areas--in the latter bulb planting tends towards less even coverage and more towards a high density/low density planting, with heavier dollops of bulbs broken up by gaps and lighter patches.

Toward the end of the month, we had our first real cold snap. We'd wake in the morning to find beautiful patterns in the frosted panes of the cold frames. The garden, which had till recently been busy and full of colour and flowers, suddenly opened up, stripped back by the frost. Autumn foliage dropped after the freeze, and the mornings dawned white and crisp. With the cold, one of our tasks has been

digging up the subtropical garden -- excavating tender plants and potting them up for the winter; to live in greenhouses under benches or to be propagated by stem or root cuttings. The bananas and tree ferns have now been swaddled in great straw-filled tepees -- structures that will stand till June next year.

On the seedling front, we have been concerned by the slow progress of our wards, which have not grown much in the cold and wet. Because we sowed our seeds quite late, and there is a danger that the seedling might not grow large enough in time for spring planting next year, we are keeping the frames tight and not chocking them much, in the hope that they'll bulk up a bit in the coming weeks. Throughout November, we've spent the cold, wet, days working in the long shed with the stove going, pricking out larkspurs and tiny poppy seedlings; our success with the latter has been a bit patchy, on the whole, and we've had too many losses.

This past week, the students were allowed to attend Fergus's Succession Planting Study Day, which addressed how to lay out a border, how to stretch the season using the dormant season of various plants and geographical zones to one's advantage, which plants can and can't take competition, how to choose bulbs, and how to solve problems or weak points in a border with plant choices. These study days have been an excellent theoretical supplement to the hands-on work we do in the garden, and they often explain and clarify the work we've been doing, and presage what's to come.

As we get into the last month of the year, we've still a lot of bulb planting to do, bedding out to complete, and pots to plant up. If weather and time permits, there's some hedge cutting and pricking out yet to do, and some anxious watching to see if our seedlings will green up. So much has happened since I arrived in September and the garden was still at its height, and now, as we wind things back and put in place mechanisms for the coming year.

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