Monthly Report February 2024 – Ernie Weller

February:

Once again it feels as though my time as a scholar is flying by as the end of February marks the halfway point, 6 months in, 6 months to go! I find myself often looking back at all I have learnt already from meadow management, seed sowing and pricking out, to border design, propagation, plant care and so, so much more. It makes me excited for this next half of the journey as we move (hopefully) out of the wet and grey days that we have had so many of this winter and into warmer, brighter ones where we will really get to see the fruits of our labour.

High Garden:

We have had a great opportunity to be a part of the re-planting in one of the High Garden stock beds, as due to the bindweed we thoroughly dug over the area and removed most of the existing plants. This left us with a clean slate to work with, except for a few Ferula communis and grasses. I have found it a really valuable experience to be a part of as we have built this area up from scratch, but rather than planting in the usual order of perennials first to create the 'blocks' and 'rivers' we started back to front planting Hesperis first. It was really interesting to think about the design and outcome of the stock bed by planting in a different order, creating initial ideas sketched in a notebook or whiteboard then adjusting the outcome when you can actually see the bed and are positioning plants. It's interesting to me to see how Fergus approaches this work as he relies less on drawn out plans and tends to let the space guide him in the moment while placing and moving plants around, seeing the areas of high density or negative space, where to leave views through the bed and checking the progress from the angles that are most often seen.

Pulmonarias : Elizabeth Strangman:

For the last few months I have had a side project of gaining more stock of Pulmonarias for the garden, Pulmonarias are plants that I initially didn't know too much about but had a curiosity for after seeing P. 'Leopard' at Elizabeth Strangman's garden. This project has been an interesting journey of discovery and new love for this genus, and through curiosity has taken me to visit Liz Strangman and Shaun Blower on a few occasions where they have kindly shared knowledge and time with me. It has been such a pleasure for me to spend time with Liz at her home, and I will soon be collecting one of each of her best plants for Dixter once the time is right for them to be divided.

- Elizabeth Strangman's Garden in mid February -

ISU:

Mid-way through the month all the students flew into Germany to attend the ISU Winter Days 16th International Perennial Plant Conference in Grünberg. From Friday to Sunday there are talks on varying topics such as Jungle-style gardening, Wild plants of Transylvania, Dionysia's, South African plants and perennial plant design. I had such a good weekend listening to these brilliant talks and meeting amazing people and have come away feeling inspired and excited to discover so much more about the plant world. It has made me especially interested in developing my knowledge of the plants and plant communities of different countries. Before this seemed slightly daunting to me through not really knowing where to begin with such a vast amount of information, but I found myself intrigued listening to the talks like 'South African Pelargoniums' and now feel ready to learn more.

- Group photos at the ISU -

Teaching:

There have been some occasions this month where I have had the chance to teach others within the garden setting and I have found that I thoroughly enjoyed it. On the 12th, volunteers from the autumn plant fair were invited for a special study day which involved them being shown the different projects that have been happening, so Will Larson and I did three talks on what propagation we have been doing and how we then care for it in the cold frames. Later in the month on the Working Weekend* I was paired with Matt Padbury to lead a group of 10 people to carry out a task in the Peacock Garden which was very helpful in learning how to manage a group effectively and share knowledge and information. This way of teaching in the garden is something I am very keen to explore further and improve on through practice and gaining more confidence in public speaking.

*The Working Weekend at Great Dixter is where roughly 40 people come together to garden with us for two days. Anyone in the industry or interested in learning more is invited and we give free education through lectures and teaching and work together in groups across Dixter. It is a magical weekend that brings people together and enhances the sense of community within the gardening world.

- The Great Dixter Working Weekend -

- A three plant combination I really enjoyed this month: Galanthus plicatus 'Augustus', Helleborus foetidus, and Phyllostachys viridiglaucescens -

- Autumn sown Lady Bird Poppies in a cold frame, to be planted in the Long Border in early March -

- Module trays of autumn sown Beth's Poppy about to be planted out into the peacock garden, roughly 1500 plants, 27/02/24 -

- Leaves of Orchis mascula, the early purple orchid -

- Through February we have completed most of the pruning that needs doing, here Naciim and I are shaping this Ivy ball using secateurs as larger tools would shred the leaves and make it look messy -

- Ernie Weller