Monthly Report January 2024 – Ernie Weller

Throughout January we have had the opportunity to make some changes to the garden and do lots of new planting which has been a real treat. Areas include the phlox bed in the Peacock Garden, the Orchard Garden, parts of the High Garden, and the Blue Garden.
10/01/24: Throughout the phlox bed runs a plant that has proven fairly invasive – *Helianthus angustifolius* – which we initially started to remove when doing the annual cutback of all the plants in the bed, however, during our morning tea break we all discussed what to do with the phlox bed and eventually decided to make a big change, to dig out all the named phloxes and embrace the spreading nature of the 'brute' plants like *H. angustifolius* by planting other plants with similar habit, such as *Euphorbia x psuedovirgata* and *Maclaya microcarpa* to see how they combine and grow together. This conversation led to the idea of experimenting with a different management system, where all the plants in this area could be cut back at the same time. For me this decision was a good reminder of how we can garden – being open and curious towards new ideas and learning to go with the flow in these situations, as it is an exciting opportunity to learn and can often lead to the creation of something magic, through not being overly controlled and planned.

During the first week or two of January, we also worked through areas of the High Garden, editing, planting, and tidying. Fergus has been teaching us the importance of plants with good structure and weight and wanted to introduce more of this into the bed that runs towards the vegetable garden, so Rob, Talitha and Matt were tasked with taking out existing plants and replanting with new ones. I was tasked just down the path with reducing the size of the *Verbesina macrophylla*, a huge herbaceous perennial that grows to great heights each season. It has a very tough base, so I had to chop through the middle to divide it in half. I then took the material down the long shed to be propagated. Having already propagated some of this plant before I knew that it takes easily on the heated bench, so I cut the base of the plant into many pieces using a saw, and potted them into small pots, labelled and laid them out on the bench. Here are some photos of the process, from the 11th of Jan to the 27th:

- 11/01/24 -

- 11/01/24 -

- 27/01/24 -

- The Phlox Bed in the Peacock Garden -

Following a similar train of thought about plantings with stronger 'weight' we moved on to working in the Orchard Garden, systematically removing unwanted plants, and reducing the size of the cardoons, to create bare open space for large groups of new late-season perennials. Naciim, Will, Matt, Talitha and I were given the opportunity to create the layout for this new space and choose the late-season perennials. This was an important lesson on how to divide up a space and select the right plants. It also taught us how in situations like this it's important not to let the existing plants affect your design decisions, as they can be dug and moved if needed, as this is a larger project intended to change the feel of the space. Previously the picture in Orchard Garden had become too muddled with lots of vertical seedheads, and we wanted to create a clearer more instant impact of colour that hits you as you walk in from the Cat Garden. The plants chosen for this area are *Monarda* 'Gardenview Scarlet', *Helenium*, *Anthemis* 'Wargrave', and *Campanula* 'Pritchards Variety', with *Verbascum olympicum*, *Lythrum*, *Isatis tinctoria* and the odd *Salvia uliginosa* in the areas between perennial groups. We still left in elements of self-sowers like oxeye daisies but kept them away from the new plants to give enough space to develop and fill out.

Photos documenting different stages of the work:

- After digging out any unwanted plants we cover the soil with boards to protect it from the rain -

- Bamboo canes used on the ground to mark out the groups of perennials, and stuck in vertically to mark the locations for tall plants like Verbascum olympicum -

- We then used pots to help visualise where the plants would go and plan how far apart to plant them. These are then replaced with small bamboo canes.

- Planting has started with the first of the main perennials being Anthemis tinctoria ‘Wargrave’. The Verbascums have been panted and the Isatis tinctoria and Lythrum are being laid out -

This way of laying out a garden bed/border is a different approach than I have learnt before coming to Great Dixter and I am enjoying becoming more familiar with this, since first watching Fergus use this method back in May 2022 till now, I've been learning how it helps to see the space, where to place your main plants, and how it creates channels between in which other elements such as self sowers and bulbs can go.

With these larger jobs, we have taken out many existing plants which has given us plenty of shed work to do on the rainy days, dividing up plants and potting them up in their thousands. This has meant that the Car Park Project assigned to Rob and I has been moving along nicely - the cold frames are filling up fast and crates of hardier plants are being lined outside.

- Being here at Dixter through winter has highlighted to me the importance of evergreen and structural elements in the garden, shown here by a really nice view of the long border with varying shapes, colours and textures in the middle of January -

- I took this photo on an evening walk around the garden as I felt that the structure of the oak seemed to represent the vast amount of life that the habitat pile supports -

- Ernie Weller