Monthly Report March 2024 – Ernie Weller

Group Trip:

On the 2nd of March, a small group of us travelled up to Birmingham to visit John Massey's garden and nursery, which was absolutely amazing. Johns Garden was pristine with beautiful conifers, well-pruned trees, pot displays, small immaculate rock gardens, stumperies, bedding, layers of spring bulbs and winter interest. We spent the morning and early afternoon with Chris Howell who kindly showed us around the garden. After lunch John showed us his incredible collection of Hepaticas, and we then went on to look at their hellebores, cyclamen and other collections and plants across the nursery. Below are some photos of the garden and nursery as well as some plants and plant combinations I enjoyed.

- Left – Foliage combination of Cyclamen hederifolium and Polypodium cambricum 'Richard Kayse' -

- Above & Right – A selection of the hellebores bred at Ashwood Nurseries, regarded as some of the finest ever produced -

Garden Work:

- Ladybird Poppies and other hardy annuals in a cold frame before planting -

Through March we have continued to plant out some of the hardy annuals that we sowed in Oct/Nov, mainly ladybird poppies into the barn garden, long border and high garden stock bed. I have found it very valuable to follow this process of growing hardy annuals from sowing to planting and observe how the timing works of when both the garden is ready for us to go in and plant, and getting the poppies out of their pots before they spoil. When the time is right for planting, each area of the garden that we plant can need slightly different technique and layout depending on our overall vision for the space and the existing perennials that are starting to grow. In the Barn garden, the spacing of ladybird poppies has to be more careful as this area of the garden already has a dense layer of perennials starting to grow, whereas the high garden stock bed that we are replanting wants to be planted more densely as the poppies will provide a much bigger show while the new perennials bulk up. With this way of planting, we again have to be close to the garden and watch the weather, as this year has been a warm and wet February/March leading to earlier perennial growth than last year and this can affect annuals that can be at risk of getting overshadowed by the established plants.

The Figs:

During March we also continued with the odd pruning job - I enjoyed pruning a rose on the roof of the Old Rose Garden Hovel with Will, as it taught us that even when you are familiar with the correct technique, not all situations are the same and this rose required slightly different treatment due to its position and surrounding plants. The big pruning task for March was to prune and train the figs along the wall in the Barn Garden. This is a task I had been really looking forward to. All the students and Hiroshi Ozawa, who has been volunteering with us for the month of March, got to work up the ladders for a few days equipped with hammers, string and nails to train the figs into a large fan with no crossing branches.

Mid-way through the month we started to think about the bedding areas and assess which ones are likely to finish early. Due to badger damage, the display of Myosotis and Tulipa Sylvestris didn't work in the Lutyens steps, so we made the decision to remove the myosotis and plant a mass of Papaver 'Angels Choir', which I am looking forward to see in full flower as this mix isn't the style I would personally be too interested in. I like to be open and observe plants and designs that initially give me this response (usually the plants soon win me over anyway) as it is always a good learning opportunity.

Silk Route Garden:

We then travelled to the Silk Route Garden at Woolbeding, where we spent a rare sunny day planting poppies and larkspurs through the appropriate regions.

- Hairy-footed flower bee, Anthophora plumipes, on a Verbascum leaf at the Silk Route Garden -

- Photo taken by Hiroshi: Naciim, Me, Will, Matt, Coralie, Ben and Rob during our lunch break at the Silk Route -

It was a very rewarding day, as many of the plants such as tulips, euphorbias, muscari and irises were flowering - it was interesting to see the effect of these, especially the bulb layers, having been involved in the planting for the last 2 winters.

March has been a busy month with many small jobs that needed to be finished before April - these included planting around 300 larkspur into the long border, pruning hydrangeas, hypericums, fuchsias, pears, roses, climbing honeysuckles and a Sambucus. We lifted and split a Himalayacalamus falconeri, added more layers to the High Garden stock bed, planted salvia sclarea var. turkestanica through the barn garden, and filled gaps in the orchard garden with 'self sowers' such as Erigeron annuus, and replaced Phlox Starfire with Phlox Logans Black. It was interesting to learn that Erigeron annuus flowers around July/August time when established and untouched, but can be later flowering when disturbed and moved. This is an interesting idea to play around with when maximising the flowering period in the garden, by slightly manipulating the individual plants flowering times depending on how you use them. The way dahlias are used here at Dixter follows a similar idea, as it is possible to get the plants out of storage earlier and get flowering plants sooner, however, the timing wouldn't work as they are used in bedding pockets, and so the previous displays wouldn't be finished by the time the dahlias are ready. Instead, we will bring them out in April/May so they are just ready to be planted towards the end of May and into June when the bedding pockets start to need replacing, the dahlias then carry us right into late autumn, maximising the flowering time the bedding pockets can provide. This has been an interesting topic to learn more about this month as we need to keep a close eye on these pockets and plan for the changeovers. Below are some notes I wrote on this, showing what methods and plants can be used and when.

<u>Designing with plants study day:</u>

Near the end of March, we sat in on this study day, these are some of my notes from the day:

- Early morning in the Barn Garden - 04/03/24 -

- Stachyurus praecox lit up by the midday sun -

- Crocus vernus in the meadow by the Lutyens circular steps -

- Narcissus in the late evening sunlight -