

## Rick Mather David Scrase Christopher Lloyd Scholar

### April 2024

It's high time for Tulips in the garden. The show is well under way and compared to last year, we are having a blinder of a display. The previous year was spoilt by the presence of tulip fire (*Botrytis tulipae*), which seemed to become fairly unhinged through all the beds, borders and pot displays. This year though, for whatever reason, the fungal spores didn't seem to get a hold. The difference between this year and last is that it's been a lot wetter for a lot longer and the temperature change has varied more drastically from low to high and back down again. I guess that made it less favourable for the disease to get going. Alas, it's been a real stunner with tulips coming out in big numbers and creating great impact across the garden. This isn't to say that there have been some failures, with pockets needing more tulips than we put in or some going over faster than we would have hoped. But overall it's been very strong. Eventually the disease did work its way in, but very lightly, predominately hitting those that were in pots. A walk round of the displays has enabled us to assess each in situ, pointing out their strengths and weaknesses, which will enable us to go on and adapt our work accordingly. To name a few of my favourites if I had to choose; *T.* 'Akebono', which we have in the Barn Garden as a permanent tulip, meaning we top it up annually. It was a vibrant yellow with subtly fringed red edges. *T.* 'Adrem' is a very showy pearlescent orange that we had in a display with *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing' and *Lychnis coronaria*. The pale/glaucous foliage of the *Lychnis* was very similar to that of the tulip but downy. It created a fantastic backdrop to which the tulip could sing. It also held well, had a strong stem and the flower sat above the foliage. *T.* 'Flashback' is a very upright, lily-flowered tulip in bright yellow. It was completely weather proof and a showstopper from any distance. It was possibly my favourite overall. *T.* 'Sanne' was also a fan favourite of mine. It was a striking lipstick pink with paler edging. It sang at a distance and paired beautifully with honesty and glaucous foliage. All of the above did well because of similar factors; they have good stature, weather resistance and the leaves are in proportion, as is the position of the flower in relation to the leaves. They were all consistent on their delivery as a variety but also as a display throughout the garden. There are of course many more that did well such as 'Pieter de Leur' and 'Apeldorn', but for me this year, the former were my favourite.

It's been a good month to assess where the garden is. Having completed the first main phase of work in the winter in prep for the current displays, it is now onto the next part of phase two where we think in more detail about the changeovers and what's to come...or what's to go over to be more precise and where. These sorts of processes enable us to look at the next steps in accordance with what we have been growing on. A lot of those we have in the frames are also hardy annuals that were propagated last autumn and have now been overwintered. They are bulking up slowly and gradually being potted on. These are; *Antirrhinum* (mixed colours), *Silene armeria*, *S.* 'Blue Angel', *Tolpis barbatus*, *Orlaya grandiflora*, *Campanula patula*, *Bupleurum griffithii* and *Centaurea* 'Blue Boy' and 'Red Boy'. There are a couple in here that we have also germinated in spring. These are all ripe for the changeovers, once the bulbs are past their best and the biennials have played their part. There is still a little time before we make those changes but in the meantime we have to keep a close eye on the pots to see which need potting up before they spoil. It also encourages us to get thinking about those combinations. For me, *Silene armeria* with *Tolpis barbatus* would be a great display. We had them together in the Walled Garden pot displays last year and they shone brightly together. *Silene* is an upright-branched annual with a bright pink compound head. *Tolpis* is more of a rambling medium sized daisy in bright yellow. So

together they both act in place of the others' inabilities. Perfect! They also play on the pink and yellow combo I know Christopher Lloyd was so fond of, so it seems right to give it a go. We will be likely to also plant either *Orlaya* or *Bupleurum* as freckles through the display but it's still all to play for, as is the location. It is also a good reminder for me that when the biennials are coming through in the beds that we need to begin sowing the next batch for the following year. They need that "two year" cycle to initiate flowering but this can be manipulated by sowing them now and overwintering them to encourage them to flower. In reality, what is actually happening is they are bolting. This is caused by an increase in gibberelic acid that becomes present after the winter spell. Gibberelic acid causes the internodes to elongate and as a result, pushing the flowering stem up so it can flower. The biennials we are to sow are *Hesperus*, *Digitalis*, *Lupinus* and *Aquilegia*.

We visited the *Narcissus* show at RHS Wisley towards the beginning of the month. I can't say I've ever seen anything quite like it, nor ever been quite so overwhelmed by a room of *Narcissus*. It housed all divisions, with prizes given accordingly for the best within a category and/or division. I took most of my pleasure looking at the *N. jonquilla* division where their delicate intricacies were highlighted by their delicate nature. They offer intrigue and curiosity in their shapes and habits. I do still appreciate the larger forms but up close and personal I can find them a bit brutish, or in a case of the doubles, where their trumpet becomes all muddled up with the tepals, I find it's a bit too crazy and reminiscent of scrambled egg. I think that with breeding, there is still an importance to be doing it for the right reasons, not just because we can. Having said that, it is all subjective and I am sure there are many fans of a larger cup variety who have no interest for the dwarfed *jonquilla* division. I do admit though that these large cup forms do have a place, particularly in larger landscapes, naturalised through meadows or on bulk in borders. I guess I will always be drawn to the miniature aesthetic as that is my desire.

The "favourable" weather has caused an influx of growth through the garden...in all aspects, beneficial and less so. It's a bizarre feeling to not be concerned with weeding through the whole winter and then all of a sudden you blink and it's all you can see. It's so important to catch this early, particularly in making sure those late season perennials have enough space around them to get to grips with their surroundings. Left untouched, these groups would surely suffer. I should say as well that not all weeds are weeds, as weeds are still wildflowers and value they do have. For example; *Anthriscus sylvestris*, a whimsical wildflower of the British verge, is a great wonder to us in the garden as it fills a void when the garden is transitioning to its next stage. It is important for us to remove it when it is in close proximity to the perennial groups, but to ensure we leave it when it isn't going to cause an issue and instead add to the picture. It is however, a fantastic time to dig up bindweed and knock it back. Having dealt with it a multitude of times, like many gardeners, I had resigned myself to accept that it is a regular chore to carry out, like mowing the lawn or cleaning the bathroom. But...if it's dug and pulled in April, then I believe there is a much better chance of knocking it back for longer. The shoots are still small (<20cm), meaning that they haven't gotten up and into the legs of other plants yet. Along with this, the rhizomes seem to come up quite easily and in tact, with large lengths of noodle being pulled from the soil. Inevitably, this moment will be missed, as there are many other jobs to be had in April, so it is easier to accept that you will become frustrated in the summer months untangling fragile twinning stems from herbaceous and woody material, ideally without damage.

Luke and I had the pleasure of collecting an old friend of Christopher Lloyd's, Patrick Bates and his partner Joyce. Patrick met Christopher in 1974 when he was on one of his journeys to Scotland to view gardens and plants. From then, he was a frequent visitor to

Patrick's garden and Patrick to his. Patrick was highly influenced by Christopher and a firm fan of his weekly writings "in my garden" for Country Life. Patrick showed us around his garden and it's clear to see the passion that he has for his garden and the joy that has come from spending time at Great Dixter. The garden is full of interesting moments, scattered through many habitats and micro-climates, with each plant so perfectly labelled on wooden posts or boards for ease of identification or location. It is clear that this is an expression of his pleasures and joy, experimenting with all the ins and outs of successful planting. On driving Joyce and Patrick back home, we had managed to fill the car to the brim with plants and Joyce informed me that Patrick would leave his suitcase if it meant there would be space for more plants. I personally took a lot of pleasure seeing them both down on the ground with their eyes in the orchids. I am very grateful for that moment as it helped me to identify the green winged orchid, *Anacamptis morio*. It's people like Patrick and Joyce that help to make Great Dixter what it is, encouraging the ethos and pleasure of horticulture. There is clearly a passion towards Great Dixter and to have seen that in the flesh felt like a real honour. As part of the younger generation of horticulturalists, I believe it is important to connect with those who take great joy in experiencing gardens, wildlife and wild-flora so we can embrace how those moments have affected them.

The garden is entering its wild phase, soon to be enveloped in a dreamy dusting of fluffy white *Anthriscus sylvestris* and acid green/yellow of *Smyrniium perfoliatum*. It feels like it's going to be less wild in some areas. We haven't done too much editing this year...compared to last year. But last year we really found out where the line is...only by crossing it slightly and having to make many edits to the cow parsley through either dead-heading or digging up. As a result of the garden being so organic and fluid in its self-sowing element, it's very difficult to truly comprehend how an area is going to change, particularly with changeable weather (to me it is anyway. But I aim to get there someday). The *Anthriscus* that is coming also seems a little shorter than I remember. This phase of the garden, although testing to some visitors is actually an ingenious step in managing a time in a garden when all the tulips have or are passing. The tulips, when they emerge, bring about such a vibrant wow factor that the memory of winter is difficult to recollect. When the cow parsley comes up, it is transitional. The transition feels quite sudden and helps to soften the blow after the tulips have faded away. Without it, the garden would feel flat and perhaps lose its hyper fantasy aspect that it is so known for. It is also at this time of year that staking is highly crucial. If it's missed then the recovery of plants that have spilled out can look messy and unhinged. Staking helps to drive an element of formality and can be carried out with canes, twine or pea sticks. It is the beginning of a long road, where hyped up plants will be moving on for the rest of the season, requiring our helping hand of canes and twine to create a delicate framework in which the garden is to sit. When viewed as a whole, it is a gentle reminder that a high impact garden like Great Dixter would be lost without twine and canes.

The topic of dead heading tulips has come up a lot in the garden, with questions being raised as to when or not at all. Fergus and Coralie have really helped me to understand the importance of longevity in the tulip displays by playing with how long you can leave a tulip after it has been pollinated. The initial question; Does the tulip self clean? Meaning, does it drop its petals or do they hold on. If they do hold on, do they do so attractively and add to the garden or does it take away from the display. Does the plant have an attractive seed head? Will it run to seed and cause an issue? The result is: Each situation is independent and the surrounding factors must be considered before any dead heading is to take place, if at all.

We visited Keith Wiley's Wildside in Devon on the recent open weekend. I had specifically avoided looking at photographs or reading too much about it, based on one

of our students (Andrew) from last year who went and spoke very highly of it. It did not under deliver. For a garden that was once a field, to be turned into a rolling topographical whirlwind of natural-styled landscape is quite a feat. The lower section is comprised of rolling mounds, planted up with colourful trees and shrubs and then under planted with a whole array of planty delights. The winding paths draw you into the next space, never giving too much away so that it reveals itself gradually. Benches are placed around the garden for you to sit and digest each vista. It's a fantasy landscape, but different to Great Dixter in its informality. It was a good reminder that although Great Dixter is a naturalised style garden, it is still, very much within a formal setting. Whereas Wildside is an informal naturalised style garden, within a naturalised setting. There is an informal freshness to it where the building of structural mounds creates rooms, vistas and pockets...but within a miniaturised landscape. It has those same feelings as being in a roomed garden but without the geometric structure that you would normally associate with such a space. Self-Sowing is clearly an important part of the garden, as is the rhythmic planting of areas that run through, creating shade as they go. Your eye moves through very naturally, never really stopping on an area for too long before being moved onto the next. On chatting with Keith he informed me that this area of Devon has three times the amount of rain that East Sussex does. The garden has created a space that enables Keith to manage water levels by building mounds and verges in which to plant so that the plants don't suffer from rot. For Keith, the garden is about creating spaces that are nostalgic to the viewer. One particular area reminded me of my visit to the meadows of North East Turkey last year, only to be informed that Keith had never been, nor was it based on that. It reminded me of the naturalised style of alpine meadows. It is up to the viewer to make their connection with the space and in an area that has so much diversity I found this very interesting. The steep banks and mounds create a landscape to which an idea is then put across. It normally comes from to Keith from an area he's seen in the wild in relation to the topography. It is important to get the shape of the garden right in the first instance, as this is what you will see all year round. The plants are the icing on the cake. They have the ability to accentuate the feeling an area can give you once you've landscaped it. There is no intention of Keith to recreate spaces, instead, use the landscape to create intimate spaces that bring the plants up to your face. One big take away for me from the visit was after we were discussing how the past winter had been and how it may have affected certain plantings. Keith mentioned that it's important to not dwell on these too much as you run the risk of missing the positives.

Rob Leonard Flack.