

Rick Mather David Scrase Christopher Lloyd Scholar February 2024

We start the month with a visit to the Silk Route garden in Woolbeding, Midhurst. With our cars fully loaded with crates, tools and limbs, we are all to ready to further develop this trading route. We took a selection of bulbs and perennials, including *Allium caeruleum* 'Azureum', *Orzyopsis miliaceae* and *Tanacetum niveum*. The change over the past 18 months has been pretty significant, predominately volume. Amazing the growth these plants can put on in such short a distance. The struggle is the rock formations. Planning permission caused some hiccups in the initial setting of the materials and their sizes are not quite as the hopes had intended. Some of these formations also looked a bit too stagnant and required a little editing to give them a more naturalistic impression. Subtraction of these rocks created divots and valleys perhaps for planting or to draw the eye into negative space. There is space for larger rocks to be brought in further enhancing this expression.

We have acquired a large collection of ex-stock, succulents, thorned individuals and tropical plants all thanks to Ernie and his contacts. Included in this haul are *Euphorbia milii*, the crown of thorns and *Kalanchoe beharensis*, the felt bush. Two extraordinary plants which confirm why I enjoy the cacti house so much. They're completely bizarre, curious plants and have added wonders to the already interesting collection of *Agaves*, *Mangaves*, *Aloes*, *Opuntias*, *Pelargoniums*, *Echiums*, *Clivias* and many more. The complete re-shuffle of the house has been a great task to take stock of what we have but also to the specific needs of each plant. Those that aren't happy are clear to show it and further re-shuffling is required. A few leaks in the roof have been challenging over this soggy month with some plants dampening off just from the presence of excess water in their inactive state. Those winter frosts have been managed through a small fan heater that clicks in around 3°C. The *Pelargoniums* are winter active though, so can be watered over this period. Unlike most of the cacti, which have to sit dry from end of October to March. The succulents can handle ever such a small amount through the winter, providing there is the heat to temper them. The easiest signs are when they crinkle, their weakened cry for help.

As we approach the opening of the garden in April we are closing the gaps through the beds and borders by planting into the open brown spaces. Making sure to leave enough space between groups that will quickly close over, but also ensuring that we don't end up with complete consistent cover of one variety, therefore leaving gaps when planting, in anticipation for plugging of another plant. That empty space between a plant variety is one of the keys to perceiving it as a naturalistic display. Some of the plants that we use to play this role are; *Papaver*, *Consolida*, *Myosotis*, *Leucanthemum* and *Lychnis*. The poppies are of a broad range of species and cultivars, showing different habits and flowering at different times.

We have brought in a selection of plants from Howard Nurseries Ltd in Suffolk. These are plants that we are aiming to build stock up of for the High Garden stock bed as well as other little experiments. The quality of the plants received was incredibly delightful. Super healthy, strong, well sized bare root pieces that have enabled us to plant out large groups immediately. The ones I'm keen to see are *Iris pallida* var. *dalmatica*, *Geranium* 'Red Admiral', *Salvia nemorosa* 'Ostfriesland' and *Macleya* 'Kelways Coral Plume' which is to be planted out in our new "invasive" bed" in the Peacock Garden to bulk out those already present. I think once these get going there may be a bit of a power struggle between those and their surroundings.

In the High Garden Stock Bed (HGSB), the initial planting has been to create the format of the bed for which the season will follow. This is determined by “high areas” and “low areas”, together forming the valleys in which the potential vistas will form between the two. Whilst the tall areas (*Miscanthus*, *Persicaria*, etc) reach their desired height, the short areas are planted with fast growing tall species of *Hesperus* and *Digitalis* that we propagated last year. Surrounding the various corners of the bed are large groups of stock plants that were either taken out last-last year or new stock from Howard Nurseries. Following in from this, *Patrinia* and *Papaver commutatum* have been planted to plug any gaps and create a natural self-sowing element to the bed. The *Patrinia* won't be flowering until much later in the season. The beds design has further taught me to acknowledge flowering time, aiming to keep note of those that are to come, when they'll last until and who could take their space. I believe this to be an area of insufficient knowledge and will take it upon myself moving forward to better document the flowering times of varieties so that I can build a stronger plant knowledge. My ideal would be to name plants that are suitable for a certain area, climate, habitat but also when their flowering time is...that is the bonus. Of course, ...”plants are valid for their foliage and the flowers are a bonus...”, as Christopher Lloyd wrote, but in such a high intensity floral garden, knowing these flowering times would make a more practical gardener out of me. These moments of reflection are integral to my development.

Back down the woods with Ritch and the coppicing begins again. The systematic process of tackling the work is of great entertainment, imbibed with learning. Each tree is felled with a target in sight, a few to follow suit until they lie on top of each other to create a framework any young child would delight in clambering over. These then have their side branches removed, for either pea-sticks or to protect the stools after cutting. Hornbeam are suited to pea-sticks as they have finely branched structures, whereas Sweet chestnut have much larger structures, which branch at broader angles, making them suitable for protection of the stools from deer. The remaining structure is then cut into 2m lengths or longer, or shorter, depending on the girth of the wood and the multiple potential uses for burning, woodwork, climbing poles or staking. Once cut these are then piled tidily to the side of a pre-determined path through the woods that Ritch has chosen for extraction by the tractor. There are a lot more logistics than I would of thought at first glance and I am grateful to Ritch for putting up with my many questions over those visits. Thank you for your patience.

Its pruning season and the symposium has passed with a real rush. I was fortunate enough to teach two keen attendees; Jane and Christie. Keen gardeners, looking to hone and develop their skills under our teachings. It's been a great lesson in teaching, reminding myself of a few simple points to make the situation clear;

1. Demonstrate and Explain (what may come easily to you may not to others).
2. Give time for them to assess and ask questions (let them figure it out).
3. Go slowly, stage by stage by stage by stage by.... (There is no rush)
4. Re-inform the principles.
5. Questions and answers.
6. Special circumstances (Inevitably, most situations differ from the process we teach but the principles are the same).
7. Nurture.

It all comes down to the initial assessment. From this we are able to tell, in most cases, if a shrub flowers on previous or current seasons wood, based on where the spent flowers sit and if there are any younger, unbranched shoots. We also assess the health and conditions of the plants as this will determine how much can be removed. Along with how much growth it has put on over the last year. Does it need regenerative

pruning? Does it even need pruning? ...or does it's habit lend itself to a more relaxed approach. Assessment has to be the initial stage. It also includes looking at thinning, decongesting, oldest material, and general reduction. Crossing is not so much of an issue in plants that are pruned annually, particularly if they hold strong shoots yet to flower. It's great fun to be in that drivers seat, using all the information that I've learnt from Great Dixter on pruning and put it to use, meanwhile re-informing what I have learnt. I hope Jane and Christie felt the same.

Rob Leonard Flack.