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May began by taking part in the Arts and Crafts (A&C) of gardening courses 1 & 2 that are run by Ed Flint, Coralie Thomas and Fergus Garrett. My main purpose in these courses was to learn how to teach and be part of the broader conversation, giving my critique and guiding the attendees. Included in this day was the opportunity to demonstrate staking to the group. This was to cover pea-sticks and their many uses in bedding displays, layering them through to give a network of support, as well as cages, be it either loosely around a small clematis or more formally around groups of fragile perennials. *Geraniums* and *Nepetas* work particularly well for this as they have delicate, weighted growth and as this builds vertically it has the tendency to spill open from the centre. This is carried out by making a circular wall of pea-sticks around these plants, one after the other and then folding the tops over and locking them in place with the other pea-sticks. Doing this at a young age ensures that they grow up through the material and retain a tidy form. Considerations in this are the final height of the plant and ensuring that the final product does not surpass this, otherwise you'll be left with a very constricted, caged plant. Other ways to stake are with canes. This is probably one of the most used forms at Great Dixter and for us it is key in holding up many of the taller, more blustery susceptible plants, as well as those that carry heavy flowers/seed heads. For singular or few plants, a single cane can be placed vertically in a hidden location behind the plant, approximately a fists width from the stem. The final tie height should be 1/3 of the plants height and above a node on the cane. A clove hitch is tied around the cane, as the final tension created by the twine will ensure there is no slip. Following this, each stem is tied in below a node so that no damage occurs to the foliage and the tie is hidden. Once all stems are tied in, then the twine can be tied off back at the starting point. For larger groups the same process is carried out but with two or more canes. The first group of ties should cover approximately 2/3 of the plant. The second should also cover 2/3 but from the other side and over lap with the first ties. This Olympic ring method is ideal for larger groups that are required to move as one unit. E.g. *Thalictrum* or *Tanacetum*. A spider web can be used for flimsy foliage plants like *Crococsmia*, by inserting a few canes around the group and then zig-zagging twine back and forth between them to create a loose network for the foliage to stand in. The trick to staking is to do it before the plant flops, not that this is always possible as the weather always has the potential to throw a few curve balls into the mix. Any twine must also be taught. There is no use in having it loose, as this will be of no help, nor too tight as this will make the plant look constricted and over worked. For those plants that you know have the tendency to flop and time is an issue, then pea-stick cages are a great help, as they can be built at any convenience prior to the main growth of a plant. A&C 2 is a much broader conversation about plants, their uses, changes to horticulture and assessing/observing the garden. Of particular interest to me in this day was to think about viewing a garden with a trained eye against viewing it with an untrained eye. We have a lot of visitors come through the garden and all of them with differing interests or ways they like to interact with the space. It made me think about the considerations that we could make to those with an un-trained eye and if any potential outcome is too challenging for them. Some of what we do in the garden can be quite overwhelming but that again comes down to the subjective nature of the space and what the viewer is used to/desires. There is definitely an importance in a space being able to be read and having unity throughout it in whatever form that takes. My counter point to this though is that a garden is an expression of those that create within it and the spirit that runs along side it. If this is the format to which a garden is created then each is a communication in its own right and the resulting affects are true to the statement. At the end of the day, you

can't please everyone and any challenging points that come out of your work can form the basis for confirmation or development. Critique should be welcomed.

Prior to this course I was asked to have a think about my takeaways from my time at Great Dixter. The question made me think about what it was from the training that I could implement in other work I carry out. One of the main takeaways is learning how to get ahead. The freedom that this has given us in the garden has really shown me the importance in such a task and the abilities it give us in creativity through the year. Really this comes down to propagation timings, not only in seed but also in the way we manage environments like the cold-frames, as well as movement of material in terms of their potting up, pricking out, taking cuttings and so forth. We are truly exposed to this in the garden and without the foresight we would either be chasing our tail or producing smaller batches/sizes of plants for the displays. In conjunction with this is the style of layered planting. It gives us the ability to stretch the season by utilising all the available plants in our arsenal. It is strategic and in tune with the seasons. Perhaps it is unreasonable to think that this could be produced in other settings such as a community project, but there are definitely elements of it that can be used to broaden a planting. The use of observation is highly important. Through it I have learnt and still am learning on how to assess my work, being critical, acknowledging external factors, thinking of further developments, accepting failures along with the pro's and con's of the work carried out. One of my other takeaways from my time in the garden is the importance of and the results of gardening holistically with a multitude of habitats. This doesn't just mean the use of log piles or brick walls, but also the rate at which I work through the garden and the benefits in leaving certain material up for longer or stacking/tying it in to be used by insects. All of what we do is ephemeral, meaning that there is no real permanence in it, but as one moment changes for the next, it opens up an opportunity for something else. Lastly, learning how to teach has been of great benefit. It's been a good reminder on the importance of being concise and orderly with information. Ensuring that I am constructive and complementary as the work moves forward.

The pot displays are always a joy and a chance to express some creative desires. Last year I trialled *Silene armeria* and *Tolpis barbatus*. The former is an upright, branching annual with glaucous foliage and compound bright pink flowers. The latter is more of a scrambling plant with bright yellow daisy-like flowers. Together the colours were knock out and this year the combination has made it in to the double borders in the High Garden with the addition of *Bupleurum griffithii*, an upright acid-green umbellifer. The first two were to be planted out in waves through the bed, with consideration to the viewpoint. The last was dotted through the display like little freckles just to accentuate the colour theme. Fergus has always spoken about how Christopher Lloyd loved bold contrasting colours; particularly yellows and pinks, so I believe this display will be a little nod to him and his palate. I worked with Naciim (our Ruth Borun Scholar) on this. At this stage in his training he is all too familiar with our routine in bedding changeovers and boarder work and it was great to see his transformation and attention to detail as we carried out the work. The key is cleanliness, which he executed with great precision. Whilst laying out the plants, we believed it to be verging on too full. Once Fergus had assessed it, he showed us how the plants we were using were beginning to elongate/initiate flowering. Had we planted the display up a week earlier (when their rosettes were denser) then the plants would have been better suited to the concentration we had chosen. They would have grown out better in the soil and branched more to fill the space. As a result, Fergus didn't believe that the density we had laid out would bulk out/branch enough to make an impactful display as well as covering the visible soil. To our surprise we managed to almost double the amount of plants in those borders. More is more, the Great Dixter motto that seems to follow every planting. We also ended up creating a network of pea-sticks through the *Tolpis* to ensure

their wavy structures stayed upright in the display. The front edges of the path had to have chestnut hurdles, as pea-sticks are weaker and more susceptible to a visitor's foot catching on them, which would result in a dislodged plant.

Anthriscus sylvestris is such an important plant in the garden as it bridges the gap from the more formal display of Tulips into our summer displays. Since its job is complete it can now gradually be removed. We do this in bite size chunks so that it isn't too drastic or jarring on the displays. We will carry this out through mid May and into the beginning of June. We peel away those with pollinated flowers. They are easily identifiable as their ovaries begin to swell and change colour, readying them for seed dispersal. By the time the task is complete, there will be enough that have set their seed around the garden for the displays next year. In some areas we dig them out, in others we just cut them back to a suitable height so that their foliage still adds to the display. If digging them out will compromise the display then we carry out the latter.

The Solar Garden bedding display is due for its changeover. It is the big time, the West End theatre of our bedding displays. Previously in its place stood *Myosotis sylvestris* and *Tulipa* 'Antoinette', a small flowered, multi-headed, lemon yellow tulip with a white flash in its petals. As it opens it turns lush rhubarb pink. Unfortunately this year, for reasons we are unsure, likely the consistent rain, the change never took place, but the display was still gorgeous none the less. Luke and I were given the task of monitoring and guiding the students as they carry out the changeover, ensuring that the work was orderly, tidy and to the highest standard. The new display is a mix of three different *Antirrhinums*, Scarlett, rose pink and bronze. The students decided to run them in snaking patterns through the bed from back to front, so that as you move through the bed the perspective of the display changes and you aren't greeted by the same static image. Each colour was laid out one at a time to ensure no mixing took place. After we were happy with the spacing, they were all planted. On stepping back it was clear that a little quality control had gone a miss and as each plant was moved so as to dig a planting hole, slight changes took place in their final position. This meant that some larger gaps between plants were visible and some were too close together, resulting in weak patches at the front. It is important to have the strength at the front. They are the first line of defence. These were key steps that I missed in the process but I am glad they took place as it has made me more conscious to quality control the work. We went back through the display and made the necessary amendments.

Lastly for this month I joined Fergus and the symposium on their trip to Prospect Cottage in Dungeness. I've not visited the garden at this time of year before and the change is quite spectacular. There was a full display of *Digitalis*, *Eschscholzia*, *Kniphofia*, *Helichrysum*, *Phlomis*, *Papaver* and *Cistus*. It's surprising how things grow in this space, considering its dry, desert-like habitat with adjoining coastal environment. The garden is going through a change at the moment, originally it was a very free draining pebbled, gritty substrate. Since the development of the garden though, the surrounding plants have, as they do, produced a layer of organic matter, through the decay of leaf litter and root mucilage. This is particularly visible in the areas where visitors walk and the shingle is tainted with a dusty blackening. It means for a change in the way in which it is or can be gardened for the future. Dungeness is a landscape formed of shingle deposits that come in from the coast. The internal landscape is more mature where as that on the edge of the shore is younger. This is visible in the flora that has colonised these spaces, with that behind Prospect Cottage beginning to form into scrub and that along the coast being fairly clean and predominantly scattered with *Crambe maritima*, sea kale. In between it is a mix of early colonisers of various grass types and the odd bramble. It is quite charming how the garden interacts within this space, using 100% of the borrowed landscape and planting itself in such a way so as to create a fantasy within it. It will be

interesting to visit this space in 20 years to see how the surrounding area has changed, along with the garden at Prospect Cottage. It does raise a question, which is valid to all gardens really: How does it move forward? What is the most appropriate way for the garden to move on since Derek Jarman has passed away? How should the canvas develop? Does it remain static, preserving the history of a dedicated space? Does it naturally adapt with the surrounding changes in the landscape, whilst adhering to the most suitable planting that Derek would have carried out? Does it change completely? How would Derek have developed it? Is it right to make such an assumption? Overall, the development of historic gardens has to be approached sensitively. Each garden has its own pace, developing at its own rate. Those steeped in history will naturally develop as a change of gardeners pass through them, but this is also forming history, so that gradual change is suitable providing it is done sensitively. Great Dixter for example is much different now to what it was in Christopher Lloyd's time, yet it is probably still the same, just with a different skin on it. It leads me to think that a garden's history is defined on how it affects the people and communities involved in it along with the plants, plantings and what they tell you about those people and that place. It comes down to how you read a landscape/space in response to those that take part in it.

Rob Leonard Flack.