DECEMBER

December was a cold, wet month at Dixter, with crisp, frosty days interspersed with endless spells of rain. The sunken garden has been under water nearly as often as not, and the stove has been going nearly constantly in the long shed, with shivering gardeners huddled around it. It has been a month of tidying up odds and ends, pricking out, potting up, cutting back, and planting bulbs -- the last push and a wind down to the Christmas break. Through the mizzle, there have been days of beautiful light and spectacular sunsets, and snowdrops and hellebores seem on the verge of blooming. As we break for Christmas, I think back gratefully on the few months I've had here already, and feel excitement and anticipation for the coming spring.

On dry days this month, we continued our bulb planting. We tucked the strange, octopus-shaped Eremurus 'Cleopatra' beneath the gravel on the kitchen drive, and gently contorted them to fit into cracks in the walls. A few even made their way onto the turf roofs of the loggia cafe. I can't wait to see their orangey spires floating above the eaves come summer. Throughout the month we ticked off smaller bits of planting -- pockets of *Narcissus* 'Baby Bloomer' or *Tulipa saxatilis* on this ledge or that. On a grander scale, we tackled the beds in the Peacock Garden, cutting back asters and helianthus and the great seed-head skeletons of the ferulas. Marking the groups of perennials with canes, we then threaded self-sowers through the rivers of space between, popping in honesty, forget-me-nots, and evening primroses either as off accents, or in high density/low density splatterings. Done right, it should look as though they seeded themselves in there naturally -- great clusters maybe just where a parent plant set seed, and sparser seedlings radiating outwards from these, as one might imagine seed to have scattered. Assessing photos from last year, we added two groups of Hesperis matronalis to serve as accents of stronger colour within a froth of whites and yellows. We planted up the bedding pockets with a mix of *Digitalis* 'Sutton's Apricot' and 'Silver Fox.' Here and there we also made adjustments to the perennials, greatly reducing a group of creeping buttercup, bringing in a group of rudbeckias, or moving a geranium. The methodical way in which we tackle each bed at Dixter allows us to make these edits at the same time as planting bulbs and cutting back. Conversely, if we were to cut back at a different time from planting bulbs or threading through self sowers, it would be all too easy to lose track of where the spaces and opportunities are, or which perennials need splitting, bulking up, or shifting.

For much of the month, however, we had to dance around the weather in how we approached any planting, retreating indoors if the ground was frozen or sodden. There was plenty of work

to tick off indoors -- we spent some days in the great barn planting bulbs in pots for our spring displays. Each pot was limited to one variety of bulb, and planted densely, so that each pot come spring will be an undiluted mass of one colour -- strong brushstrokes for a high impact pot display. One trick good Michael Wachter showed us was to lay the outer bulbs slightly diagonally against the rim of the pot, thus minimising an unwanted effect where the outside margins of a flared pot can look bare and unplanted. Our work in the peacock garden and elsewhere also provided us with plenty of material to process and propogate. We made splits of asters, helianthus, eupatoriums, and thalictrum, and put these under glass to grow on and root up over the winter. We spent many a day in the long shed working through material we'd lifted from the beds, splitting or simply potting on, for later use in the garden or for eventual sale in the nursery. Also in the long shed, we continued pricking out seedlings, particularly of larkspur and Beth's poppy, but also of *Campanula patula*, nicotiana, and of a yellow brassica highly rated by Michael.

While the weather this month was unrelenting, the work remained interesting and stimulating, and the garden team made its own cheer, packed around the blazing stove, playing music in the long shed while the rain hammered down outside. I can't wait for the new year at Dixter, and to see the ways in which our winter work pays off in the coming months. As we broke for Christmas on Friday the 22nd, we were treated to a staggeringly beautiful sunset, its reds and pinks reflected on all the lights and the glass of the greenhouse roofs. It felt like a fitting close to these first few months at Dixter, and the beauty of the garden bathed in this rich light bled into the reflective mood I often feel at this time of year. This year, the overwhelming mood is one of gratitude. I would like to say thank you again to Club 22 and to everyone else who made it possible for me to be here -- I cannot thank you enough.

Neil the cat patiently bearing her adornment, and an aster split from the Peacock Garden

The Peacock Garden in progress – grasses and perennials trussed up and canes marking their groups

The Great Floods

Luke Senior preparing to face the Great Floods

Winter light