FEBRUARY

February kicked off with a lot of digging, as we continued the task of ferreting bindweed out of the high garden stock bed. We approached things pretty systematically, starting at one end, one gardener per scaffolding board, spread out across the width of the bed like a search party, and digging the area directly in front of each board. We then advanced the boards one fork spit forward and repeated the process, until we'd covered the length of the bed. We dug the bed twice over, and at the end, with aching backs and legs, joked grimly that we'd probably still find bindweed when it came to planting time (spoiler alert: we did).

Midway through the month, this years' students travelled to Germany to attend the annual ISU conference in Grünberg, Germany. The three days of the conference sped by, packed with fantastic talks and discussions, great community, and great cake. Particular highlights for me were Oron Peri's talk on his conservation work growing rare bulbs; L. Máté Tálas discussing his travels through the Caucasus in search of interesting and resilient perennials, Leon Kluge's two talks on South African pelargoniums and other garden perennials were, unsurprisingly, my favourites, and I hope to schedule my annual visit back home with some plant-y trips in the Cape (though there's also part of me that would really like to trek out to see the desert succulents in the more northern Richtersveld)

At Great Dixter, February is generally a month of pruning -- an activity which, at Dixter, is usually planned to coincide with the annual pruning symposium. This year, unfortunately, the first few days of the symposium clashed with the ISU conference. Nonetheless, once we returned, Fergus explained to us how one can tell how to prune a shrub by reading it to see if it flowers on new or old wood, and assigned us a variety of pruning jobs. Matthew Padbury and I tackled the Kiftsgate rose on the kitchen drive.

It was certainly a two person job--the young shoots that will bear this years flowers are incredibly delicate, and easily knocked off (we were told horror stories of how previous years' students had stripped the canes through carelessness), and the rose itself is incredibly vigorous, throwing out lengthy canes that need to be delicately disentangled from their neighbours (be these rosy or otherwise). Often we'd be stretched out at full reach, one of us holding aside encroaching obstacles as the other cautiously retrieved a rose cane from the far reaches of the bed, slowly threading it back through to the central post, taking great care not to snap it or to knock off its buds. The aim in pruning this rose is first of all to remove all the

flowered wood (easily distinguishable by its tiny bifurcating branches and the remnants of its hips), and then to train the remaining canes -- long, straight, covered in this years' soft buds -- around the post so that they both cover it and loosely splay from it at various levels like a great fountain of rose. The end product should have billowing rose canes covering the post all the way around, including the top, with no obvious gaps or bare patches. Some murderous feelings towards the rose aside (especially towards the end of the day, and many thorns later), we were very satisfied with our end product -- all very 360°, even coverage, until high winds blew all those loose canes into new configurations a few days later.

The weather this month remained grim and wet. The beautiful crocus display was somewhat marred by the fact that it was rarely sunny enough for the flowers to open (though they were breathtaking when they did). When the sunken garden flooded for the umpteenth time, we played it to our advantage, and launched Ernie Weller onto the waters in the rickety Dixter coracle, all to great hilarity and excitement. The weather also sadly didn't cooperate for the working weekend that Dixter hosted just after the February pruning symposium. 35 gardeners, professional and amateur, came to Dixter for two days to help out in the garden, and got to experience work at Dixter, while building connections between gardeners across the country. We cut back erigeron and vinca from the walls on the lower terrace, built a new habitat pile in the honeybee field and a new habitat roof at the Loggia, and weeded the kitchen drive, while getting thoroughly soaked by the rain. Nonetheless spirits didn't appear too dampened, perhaps revived by the amazing food prepared by Rob Flack and his partner Samara, a big fire in the Great Hall, and plenty of good company.

Elsewhere, we are just beginning to plant out some of the hardy annuals we have been growing on over the winter. There's a real sense of accomplishment in seeing these seedlings go out into the garden, having sown them in autumn, and then pricked them out and potted them on. There'll be plenty more of this planting out next month -- here's hoping it's warmer and drier!