JANUARY

It was lovely to return to Dixter in January. We'd only been off work for a little over a week, but there was a real happiness in coming back to the garden cottage, where I am living while at Dixter, and in walking around the garden to see what had emerged from the ground or crept into flower while we were away. The hellebores and snowdrops were out. The witch hazel in the peacock garden had begun, mingling its orangey tones with the purple of a little azalea on the kitchen drive. Every time I come back to Dixter I am struck by the birdsong -- the comparative silence elsewhere is something never quite clock until I return and hear it in a rush all around me.

Possibly the most magical corner in the garden at this time of year is by the two chimonanthus in the Peacock Garden. I don't have much of a nose, but the scent of wintersweet is almost poignant. It is a thin, subtle scent, but floats on the air and stops you in your tracks. Below these scented branches, a thick carpet of hellebores and snowdrops completes the scene.

Just across from this corner is what was formerly the Phlox Bed. Over the past years, however, it has become infested with *Helianthus angustifolius*, a very pretty sunflower that unfortunately spreads very aggressively via its formidable rhizomes. As we were working through this bed, we found these rhizomes found impossibly lodged within the roots of the phloxes, eupatorium, and asters. We discussed trying to remove all the helianthus from the bed, potentially digging up all the perennials and giving the space over to several displays of annuals for the year, jumping in to dig up any stray helianthus as it sprung up. Then Fergus suggested matching the helianthus with something equally thuggish, and seeing who would win. The idea caught our fancy. Why not experiment with several brutish elements and create a Bed of Thugs, staging a great clash of the titans within the border? And so, we planted Macleya, various salixes (*balfourii*, *exigua*, *udensis* 'Golden Sunshine'), lysimachia, and *Euphorbia pseudo-virgata*. We also added *Allium* 'Summer Drummer' and chicory, and talked about introducing a carpet of annuals to deal with self sowers in the first year. *Thalictrum* Elin remained in the bed, as did a small witch hazel -- with promises of protection and wishes of luck for its survival.

Another big task this month was cutting the holm oak, which involved leaning the tallest of our ladders against the towering hedges. I hugely enjoy hedge-cutting, and perhaps doubly

enjoy hedge-cutting at height (although my shoulders tire quite quickly wielding the heavier long-armed cutters, and the ladders feel a little precarious when perched against a sparser bit of hedge). It was good fun viewing the topiary lawn from a new perspective, and pleasantly fiddly mirroring the lines of the lower yew hedging we'd cut earlier in the year with the lines of the holm oak. It's a bit of a time-sensitive task, as the cutting needs to happen before the crocuses emerge from the grass below (we'd inevitably trample them with our constant ladder-shifting).

I only got one day of holm oak cutting, however, and then I took a few days annual leave to visit a good friend in Greece. While we didn't do much botanising, we saw some interesting euphorbias and beautiful, ephedra-covered sea-cliffs in Nafplio.

Back at Dixter, other tasks included digging through the High Garden stock bed, which is infested with bindweed (more on this next month), mouse-proofing frames, an exploratory dig in the Cat Garden to see if we could find an old drainage pipe (alas, we had no luck, though we did find some beautiful clay), and replacing fallen chestnut posts throughout the garden. These posts are used in the beds to support a range of climbers, either as their sole host, or to take the bulk of their weight while the odd tendril trails onto a nearby shrub. For some of these climbers, we needed to make new posts, as the old ones had rotten away. This entailed selecting a chestnut limb of the correct size (bearing in mind that a good foot or two needed to go into the ground), skinning the bark off using a drawknife, and finally charring about two feet of the end of the post destined for the ground. This charred layer makes the wood more resistant to water, and thus makes the buried portion of the post less liable to rot.

All in all it's been a fascinating month, and with the start of bulbs and winter shrubs flowering in the garden, I can't wait for what's to come. The weather has been miserable (apart from some glorious, crisp, clear days), and the bulk of the High Garden bindweed-digging still awaits us, but even this dull and tiring task is accompanied with the excitement of what planting might follow after, and tantalising hints of what the new year might hold.

High Garden stock bed: before, in progress, and plans & schemes (scribbled on a board by Fergus)

Cutting the holm oak

The gorgeous witch hazel in Northiam's churchyard

The magical chimonanthus corner

Skinning the chestnut posts

***Euphorbia acanthothamnos* at Nafplio**

Ephedra on the cliffs at Nafplio, and *Asplenium ceterach* (I think!) at Acrocorinth

Cyclamen growing at Acrocorinth