

February Report

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Clockwise from left: Snowdrops blooming in the walled garden; Crocus tommasinianus blooming in the Barn Garden; Crocus flavus and other early crocus blooming in the orchard meadow; Narcissus cyclamineus blooming by the front drive.

Pruning in February

February is the month for pruning at Great Dixter, coinciding with the yearly Pruning Symposium. While we would be able to do pruning work earlier in the season, such as when we enter the beds to cut back and mark out the perennial groupings in December and January, we delay all of our pruning to do during the symposium. Fergus instructs a fascinating and flexible method of pruning based on whether the tree or shrub flowers on last year's growth (flowering on old wood) or producing new shoots with flower buds (flowering on new wood). By assessing a plant and recognizing different growth patterns, you figure out how to approach it and what material to take out of it. For woody plants flowering on old wood, you take out any flowered branches (those which have formed trusses of side shoots from where flowers bloomed) and leave strong, vigorous growth made from last season, which are unbranched. For woody plant flowering on new wood, you are adjusting for the height and shape of the plant, cutting to the point from which you would like new growth to emerge from. A surprising revelation for me was how much fun it is to prune hydrangeas! I enjoy working the plant out like a puzzle, as with hydrangeas you are limited to just a few branches to select from. I particularly enjoyed pruning *Hydrangea quercifolia*, a species native to the eastern US. *H. Quercifolia* has gorgeous foliage, flowers, and bark, and so the process of pruning it involves consideration of all three features. Because we want both good foliage and flowers, care must be taken to select strong new growth with large buds and also cut back certain areas to stimulate leaf growth.



T and Matt pruning the Kiftsgate rose on the Kitchen Drive, a multi-day task involving carefully untying the rose from the pole and pruning out flowered wood before retying it on again.

A visit to Elizabeth Strangman's Garden

Elizabeth Strangman is a legendary nurserywoman of the former Washfield Nursery, responsible for the introduction of the modern picotee hellebore and an extremely knowledgeable propagator; needless to say I was extremely excited to visit her in her garden. We were very fortunate to have an opportunity to visit Liz and get a tour of her incredible winter plantings. It was fascinating to see a garden so full of color in the month of February, lit up with *Cyclamen* species, *Cardamine quinquefolia*, *Crocus tommasinianus*, and numerous snowdrops and hellebores. A favorite from that day was seeing tiny *Sanicula epipactis* (syn. *Hacquetia epipactis*), a wonderful woodlander in the *Apiaceae*.





Traditional German half-timber architecture in Grunberg's old town.

We took a fantastic trip to the International Perennial Plant Conference in Grunberg, Germany where we enjoyed three days of fantastic lectures and conversation with plantspeople from 19 different countries. Particular highlights for me were talks by Máté Tálas and Razvan Chisu on flora of the Balkans region. I would love to travel to the Carpathians and see *Hepatica transsilvanica* in the wild, and Máté's small scale native plant propagation methods were fascinating, especially the use of Peter Korn-style sand beds for growing xerophytic and steppe species.

ISU Conference in Grunberg, Germany



The Dexter ISU 2024 crew from left to right: Ernie Weller, myself, Sarah Hudson, Matt Padbury, T Slabbart, and Naciim Benkreira.



Due to the exceptionally rainy winter we've been having at Dixter, many days are spent working in the Long Shed and potting sheds pricking out and potting on hardy annuals, splitting up perennials, and sowing seeds. It has been interesting to see how much work can be done to prepare the garden on these rainy days, ensuring that we have a good deal of stock to work with when it comes to planting out the beds when the weather clears up.