

December 2023 Report
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Galanthus reginae-olgae blooming in by the steps to the Solar; providing a refreshing flush of new flowering in early winter.

Bulb planting and bedding pockets

December is a particularly busy month, as we progress in the garden to finish planting bulbs and the bedding pockets by the end of the month, when we break for the holiday. That means spending a significant amount of time in the borders cutting back, clarifying the beds, and planting new schemes for the spring display.

The annual bedding pockets provide interesting and ever-changing color throughout the season, as they are rotated with fresh plantings several times throughout the season to renew areas. In December, we are particularly focused on creating a strong spring display with tulips, which are paired with a number of different annual or biennial companions.



*Above: A bedding pocket in the high garden with an experimental planting of woad (*Isatis tinctoria*), *Salvia forskaehlei*, giant white drumstick alliums (*Allium* 'Mt Everest') and purple tulips. Certain smaller bedding pockets are used for more experimental plantings to test combinations before they are used in more prominent bedding areas.*



*Left: *Narcissus cordubensis*, a dwarf mediterranean species, to be planted near the terrace steps. In addition to the annual displays, we also focus on adding new permanent bulb layers to areas where there is space.*



The Aster Stock bed in the Peacock Garden, before and after the the process of cutting back and marking out groupings. After, we remove any compacted areas of soil and planting a layer of self-sowing annuals such as forget-me-nots, ox-eye daisy, and evening primrose.

Cutting back and clearing out beds

Here in the Peacock Garden, we move through the bed using a board network to prevent compaction to the soil, then begin cutting back and clarifying the image so we know what and where plants are growing. This allows us to see the individual groupings and begin to work out their placement, adjusting the size of clumps by lifting, splitting, and resetting as needed. This quadrant, known as the Aster Stock bed, is composed of various groups of *Symphyotrichum* cultivars arranged in discrete groups rather than intermingled, allowing for easy identification and propagation of named stock by the nursery team. Some asters are prone to spreading by rhizomes, and others still can seed out into other areas, so we have to be careful to weed and define the groups well. Here, there are three groups of asters comprised of *Symphyotrichum laeve* ‘Arcturus’, *S. turbinellum*, and *S. lateriflorum* var. *horizontalis*.

It is always fascinating for me to see flora of the eastern and midwestern US used here in British gardens, especially those tallgrass prairie and woodland edge species which are well represented here in this bed. *Veronicastrum*, *Vernonia*, *Verbesina*, and *Symphyotrichum*, all of North American origin, are critical for their flowers and seedheads in late summer and autumn. They

seem to tolerate the climate well here, although they are more sensitive to early-season competition in the beds, and particular genera like *Helenium* or *Phlox* must be safeguarded from self-sown intruders who might squeeze out the young basal shoots.



Thalictrum 'Elin' with both a stem-split and terminal bud split.

Thalictrum splits

Thalictrum 'Elin', a valuable form that we grow in several places at Dexter for its wonderful foliage, is slow to bulk up naturally. We increase our stock by aggressively splitting individuals down by using a variety of different slices to make the most of the material we have. These splits

are potted on and placed in a double-frame where they have been hugely successful, putting on new growth in just two months.



Cleaning up the farm cottage and potting on new bulbs for a spring display. As we've been focusing on potting up bulbs into containers all through December, we also turned to our accommodation to create displays for the front of the farm cottage. Species tulips and muscari were particular interests this year, so it will be exciting to see what comes up in a few months.



Back home in Maine, walking along a tidal salt marsh in the fog.