

March 2024 Report
Will Larson – Chanticleer USA Christopher Lloyd scholar



A glowing view of the high garden, with the Tulipa praestans 'Shogun' peaking through the ferny foliage of Ferula communis.

A visit to Ashwood Nursery

As a weekend trip, Ernie, Matt, Naciim and I made our way by car northward from Great Dixter to the Midlands to visit John Massey's garden at Ashwood Nursery outside of Birmingham. Matt, who was the 2023-2024 Adam Greathead scholar, spent six months working in John's garden before coming to Dixter, so the rest of us were particularly excited to see Ashwood after hearing about it for so long from Matt.

John's skill and love for growing Hepaticas is well known, and his collection is certainly one of the best in the world. I am also keenly interested in the genus *Hepatica*, as the two species native to eastern North America (or one species with two varieties, according to John) are some of the finest ephemeral woodland plants, *H. americana* and *H. acutiloba*. John's collection is really remarkable, and I was introduced to a variety of new species and forms that I had never seen before. Of particular interest for me were the small Japanese species, such as *Hepatica insularis*, with its tiny, mottled leaves. John meticulously cares for his collection, spending about three hours every day in this custom-built alpine house watering, weeding, and appreciating Hepaticas.



Ashwood is also renowned for its hellebores, and the Ashwood Evolution group represent some of the best yellow-flowered forms available today. I prefer the apricot shades and the warm, clean yellows; 'Pamina' in Liz Strangman's garden, the Ashwood Sunset series, and the Ashwood anemone-flowered yellows are my favorites.



A lovely potful of Hepatica insularis in John Massey's collection.



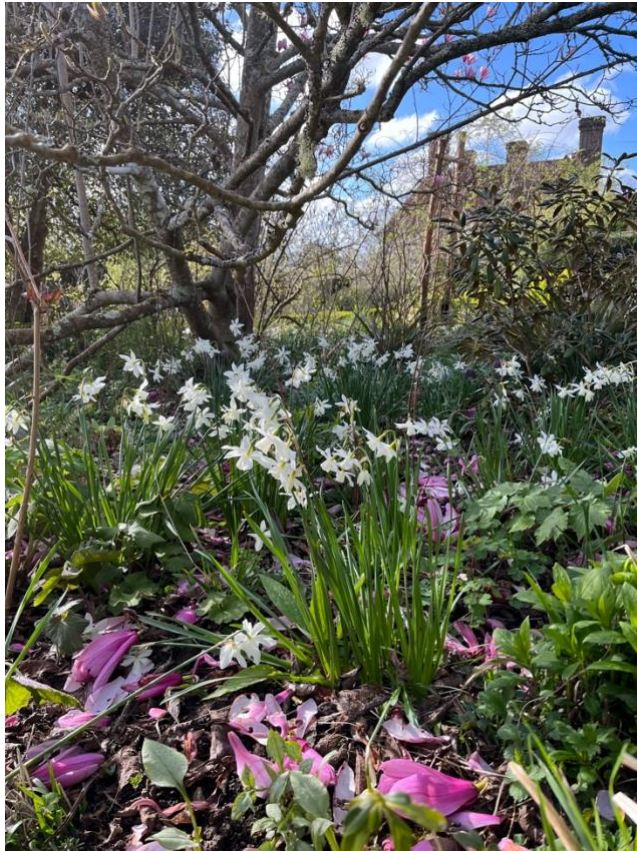
Working at the Silk Route

We had beautiful weather for the garden team's first visit to the Silk Route in the new year; by the end of the day, we were all working in our T-shirts, and the sun was shining warmly on the stones which we planted between. We ran a number of different annuals and biennials through various sections of the Silk Route, such as Beth's poppy (*Papaver albidum subsp. Lecoqii*), *Salvia sclarea var. turkistanica*, and *Hesperis matronalis*. It was fascinating to see the spring flush of green color as small bulbs, such as fritillaries, muscari, scillas, and tulips as they all emerged through various euphorbias. I really enjoy the style of gardening at the Silk Route, perching between stones to plant nooks and crannies, and also observing the patterns of self-sowing and natural expression of the local seedbank as the garden ages. Editing at the seedling stage is a skill that I want to continue to improve, as I think it is one of the most interesting ways to garden. Providing unique or difficult-to-cultivate plants with the specific ecological conditions for them to grow and reproduce sexually is to me, personally, among the greatest thrills in the garden. I am curious to see what geophytes in the Silk Route will persist, and how to usher the more stubborn species to seed around and maintain a regenerating population.



Tying in the Figs

It was a thrilling job to be given the large central fig in the Barn Garden to prune and tie-in, which provides a wonderful structure on the interior side of the White Barn. Especially at this time of year, when most of the garden's vegetation is low and most trees have yet to leaf out, the figs are a great feature. Matt and I worked from either side, meeting in the middle, and using tarred twine to securely tie the branches to nails, hooks, and wires in the weatherboard. It is important to provide enough wiggle room to allow for the branches to swell and grow. Once you get a handle on the rhythm of the work, it is an extremely satisfying job, and we were blessed with three days of clear weather to work on it. When it does rain, it becomes a rather uncomfortable job, as you try to see through droplet-covered glasses as cold water drips from the eaves into your face and down your neck. Seeing the fan fully tied in is well worth the effort!



Clockwise from top-left: *Narcissus* 'Thalia' skirted with fallen *Magnolia* 'Leonard Messel' petals; kitchen drive vegetation kicking in to high gear with *Verbascum olympicum* and *Ferula communis* amidst *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*; Barn Garden view across the sunken garden: *Tulipa* 'Apricot Impression' and *T.* 'Brown Sugar' in pots ('Brown Sugar' is the better performing of the two, by far. 'Apricot Impression' was badly marred by fire blight and did not hold up to wind, even in a sheltered position).



Hardy annual planting

Here in the High Garden, the team worked to run successive layers of hardy annuals to create rivers flowing through the stock bed, tying in between the permanent groupings of stock plants. Ladybird poppy (*Papaver commutatum* ‘Ladybird’) and *Hesperis matronalis* were used to great effect between the newly planted clumps and sections of perennials, providing low and tall areas to bounce the eye into the center of the bed. We come back through the bed multiple times to add new layers onto existing layers, using a host of short-lived perennials and biennials such as *Oenothera glazioviana*, *Geranium pratense*, *Leucanthemum vulgare*, and *Primula vulgaris* to scatter and intersperse throughout the bed. Other plants such as *Rudbeckia triloba* or *Erigeron annuus* are used as dot plants to create accents with good height and long displays which tie in the groupings.

My first pot display

To kick off the the garden’s opening, I was asked to put together a pot display in the Blue Garden with fellow scholar T under the tutelage of gardener Rob Flack. We used a variety of different pots, setting out large terracotta pans brimming with tulip foliage, the fruits of our labors from November and December when we originally potted up the bulbs. We also used other foliage accents and woody plants to provide good contrast of textures and shapes which make the eye work. Interestingly, laying out your pots is the same as laying out your stones when you build a dry stone wall. In both cases, you set out your material in rows according to their size and use in front of your building area, which allows you to select the best pieces and test out how they fit in the larger picture. We used interesting conifers to hold the space and create good structure to then fill in with large pots of tulips. The edges are then gilded with lots of interesting little accents in smaller pots: my favorite by far are the cheery jonquils, *Narcissus* ‘Baby Boomer.’

The finished pot display in the Blue Garden, tulips ready to burst into color.





A fish and chips dinner with the Dexter garden scholars at Maggie's in Hastings.