Talitha Slabbert

# APRIL REPORT

April rolled around, bringing with it bright, clear days, and the first real sense of spring at Dixter. Everywhere around the garden daffodils and tulips splattered the beds with colour, and in the woodlands the bluebells burst into a sudden breathtaking blue. After a long, wet, winter, these days of sun and sudden colour brought with them a rush of gratitude, and I'm once again pinching myself that I get to be here and to work and learn in this incredible garden. A thousand thanks, yet again, to everyone who made it possible.

Work continued as usual this month, with a lot of potting on, tidying, continued bits of pruning, and pricking out California annuals like Clarkias and Hemizonas. Sown at the end of March, these germinate within days, and will be grown on to fill bedding pockets that go over and become available in the early summer. Elsewhere, Ernie Weller and I pruned a Spiraea outside the kitchen yard, removing some of its flowered growth, reducing its height and saving new, unflowered shoots, while cutting out larger tufts here and there to add texture to the shrub. Days were divided between garden work -- pruning, cutting back perennials, and weeding -- and production (sowing, pricking out, and potting on), in order to ensure we have good stock to go into the garden as and when needed.

Along with our regular work this month, however, there was also a real sense of appreciation for the fruits (or flowers, rather) of our winter labours. We took time to walk around the garden and revel in the bright and bold bedding combinations, and to observe them in their various stages from bud to flower to senescence. These slow meanders were not purely self-indulgent, of course, but served as an opportunity to assess, sometimes quite critically, how various combinations performed, and to judge different bulbs on their merits and shortcomings. Particularly strong tulips included classics like the scented 'Ballerina' and 'Queen of Night,' but also 'Daydream' -- a loose-flowered yellowy-orange one-- a delicate pink-white, scented tulip called 'Sanne,' and 'Flashback,' a sturdy, lily-flowered yellow that withstood much abuse from the weather in the topiary lawn well. I also liked the scented 'Brown Sugar' (which looks like its name), the dark lily-flowered 'Burgundy,' and the rich embery smoulder of 'Amber Glow.' This last tulip, however, along with the neon coloured 'Ad Rem,' had points deducted for dropping its petals in an unattractive way ('like a droopy eye,' said Fergus).

This sort of assessment was a really interesting way to approach the bedding combinations. There's a lot of creative freedom at Dixter, and plenty of opportunity to try things out. Sometimes a bedding display fails to perform well -- for example Tulipa 'Antoinette' got tulip fire and never really opened up in the solar bedding, and elsewhere a tulip sold to us as 'Blue Aimable' looked washed out and overwhelmed in its situation, and held on to its browning petals unattractively when it went off. I've liked learning to look at plants critically in this way, and at the same time it's an enjoyable style of gardening which isn't afraid of failure, but embraces it as an opportunity to learn.

We also got to experience this sort of assessment in a different, more formal context at Wisley, where Fergus and assistant head gardener Coralie Thomas were involved in the tulip and muscari trials, respectively. We accompanied them on two of their visits, and observed different varieties of tulips and muscari, judging them among ourselves on criteria like consistency of height and flowering time, length of flowering time, size and shape of flower, and foliage-to-flower ratio. After applying this sort of critical lens in the context of the garden, it was incredibly interesting to get a taste of the sort of work that goes into horticultural trials and AGM awards.

While we wholeheartedly embraced the April tulip fever, the conversation at Dixter also turned to sustainability, and to the question of whether gardeners should keep up the tradition of buying in and planting out Dutch grown bulbs, which by and large are grown as annuals. With climate change, and wetter winters, tulip fire is likely to become more and more of a problem, and it's worthwhile asking ourselves whether we can justify this quite expensive and wasteful practice. Conversely, as a garden that's open to the public, part of our job is to create a spectacular spring display, and gardens are, after all, also spaces for pleasure -- perhaps in the grand scheme of things the frivolity of the tulips isn't something we should dispense with. These are the sorts of conversations that often animate the mess room at break time, and they are indicative, I think, of an approach to gardening that is curious, stimulating, and doesn't shy away from challenges.

This month I fell even deeper in love with the woodlands, where the sea of anemones gradually gave way to mesmerising waves of blue. Here and there, tucked at the foot of little banks, early purple orchids added pinkish hues to the blue, and as the month ticked over, great foaming rifts of wild garlic rushed in to add to the picture. I found myself wandering

into the woodlands most days after work, balancing along a fallen tree or following a badger path to drown myself for a while in the wash of blue.

All in all, Spring at Dixter has felt incredibly joyous, and filled with excitement for what's to come. One day, towards the end of the month, most of the students remained wandering the garden after work by some unspoken agreement, and, as if we got trapped by the sunlight, the flowers, and the hum of insects, we moved about, by turns sprawling out of the Lutyens steps or going off to look at the terrace or the shrubs flowering in the Cat Garden. I feel so incredibly thankful to be part of this garden and this community of people.