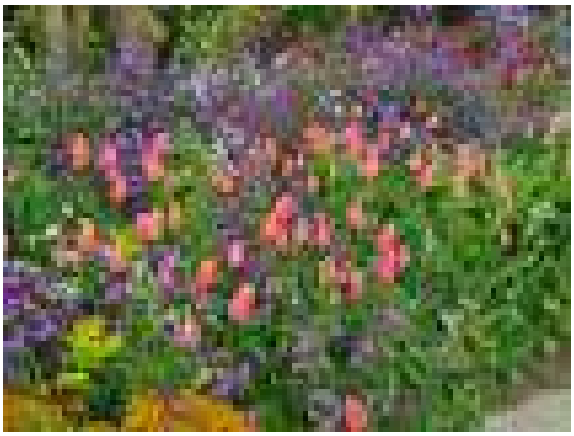
Monthly Report April 2024 – Ernie Weller

At the start of the month, Fergus explained to us all how April is more a month of odd garden jobs, nursery work and propagation as we have put a lot of effort into saving ourselves work in the growing season by doing the bulk of it in the winter. This allows a bit more time to be creative during late spring and summer with bedding combinations, however, none of this needs doing during this month as the majority of the spring bedding won't finish until May into June. It is an important month for us to dot the I's and cross the T's in the garden with tasks such as editing out any unwanted brown, dead or damaged plant material, removing weeds and replacing any failing plants. This slight reduction in workload pressure has allowed us as a team to spend more time observing and assessing the garden as it comes into its first main burst of colour with the tulips flowering. This is important for us as we can think back to our thoughts and plans when we were planting the tulips and see how these ideas have played out in reality, and with this make notes for the future. These notes are crucial when deciding which bulbs we will buy next and help us remember any good combinations that could be used again in a different location or how they could be tweaked to improve. For me, this is one of the most rewarding aspects of gardening and I find that I build layers of knowledge each year through this process of thinking back, observing the present and making notes for the future.

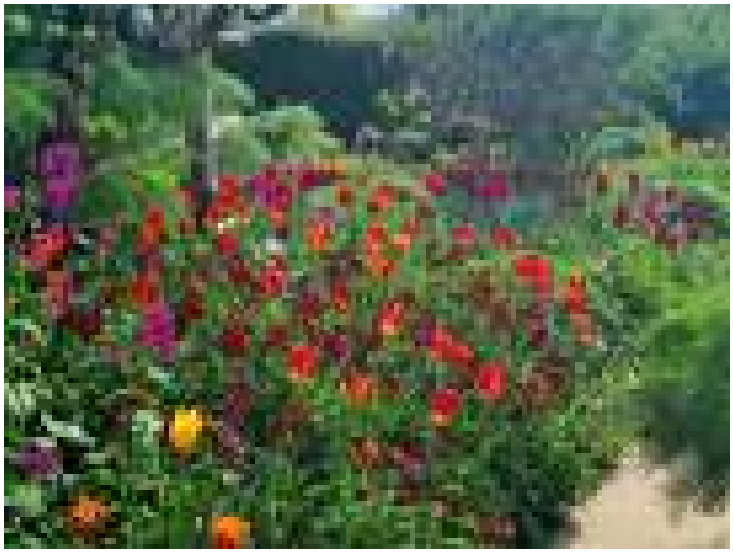
With the very wet winter we had this year, we have been looking forward to the tulips flowering, as although the snowdrops and crocuses were still amazing, the weather really wasn't kind to them and we only got a few sunny days to enjoy them properly. The tulips this year did not disappoint, despite our worries about tulip fire (which is thought to be worse after wet winters), we had an amazing show right through April, as the temperatures cooled slightly which extended their flowering.

Below are some of the tulip moments I enjoyed most through April:



Left: Tulip 'Negrita' planted high/low density through the long border, in combination with Smyrnium perfoliatum, white Honesty, and forget-me-nots.

Above: Tulip 'Menton' in a patch at the front of the Long Border. I liked this combination of the salmon pink with the honesty more than I had expected, as I tend to prefer the more intensely coloured tulips at Dixter which give a real impact and burst of colour so early in the year.



Tulip ‘Amber Glow’ with Erysimum ‘Vulcan’ and Lunnaria annua (Honesty).

In my November report I wrote:
“Another bedding area I’m excited to see the results of is the double beds in the High Garden, where Ben Jones, Naciim and I have experimented by using the tulip ‘Amber Glow’ with E. ‘Vulcan’ and Honesty. ‘Amber Glow’ was only trialled once here last year in a pot, and is a very similar colour to the Erysimum, but with yellow fading up from the base of the flower. We are hoping that the tulip is just the right height to see the yellow as if it is too short the colour may just merge with the wallflower.”

I enjoyed watching how this bedding idea developed, and how it turned out compared to our plan back in November. I like the colour of tulip ‘Amber Glow’ a lot, with its fresh green stalk and yellow-to-red gradient on the petals. It was interesting to see that in its early stages, it is more yellow overall (see photo above), mid way through flowering it has a slight tint of purple (see photo top right) and towards the end the red deepens and intensifies. For me, the combination with the wall flower worked well as the combination of similar colours gave a very bold impact while the hint of yellow at the base of the tulip allowed it to stand out just enough to not blend completely. The downside to Amber Glow that we observed this year was how it dropped its petals, as it seemed to drop just one petal at a time, making its display slightly messy over time, rather than finishing all at once. While observing this display during its early stages (top left) we made notes that this may be repeated in the solar bedding next year with some tweaks: it could have done with more impact from the tulips by increasing the density, and that the addition of Smyrnium perfoliatum could work better than honesty, as a fresh lime green contrast.

A favourite amongst many of us this year was Tulip 'World Friendship' (above and left) which was at the end of the long border, planted in combination with Narcissus Pipit. Both the daffodil and the tulip were a similar pale, butter yellow, which is untypical of Dixter tulip plantings which normally have more contrast however it worked particularly well in its position by the bench as it provided a period of calm colour where many people take a rest on the bench at the end of the path.
It was the way the flower holds itself that impressed me most with Tulip World Friendship, as when fully open, the middle three petals were held tighter creating a clear separation from the outer petals, which I felt gave it a very refined appearance.

Another favourite this year was Tulip 'Sonnet'. Initially I wasn't sure about it but quickly grew to really like it and I would put it in my top 3 for this year.

Tulip ‘Sonnet’ to the right with Campanula medium as its host plant, providing a foliage understory while the tulips flower. Tulip saxatilis to the left planted in the bed, and cracks of the stone walls by Naciim and I.

Tulip ‘Beauty of Appeldorn’ in the Peacock Garden

Tulip ‘Akebono’ with Prunus glandulosa Alba Plena in the foreground and Osmanthus delavayi behind.

In my December report I wrote about planting the Hovel bedding, where we chose Anthriscus Ravenswing, Lychnis coronaria and Tulip ‘Ad Rem’. If I had to pick a favourite tulip and area of bedding this year, it would be the Hovel Bedding. I found the tulip to be really effective with its egg shaped flowers against the more subtle tones of the host plants, and I even quite liked when the petals started to fall, as it made the surface area of colour larger, giving a really good show from a distance.