Monthly Report May 2024 – Ernie Weller

At the start of May, Will and I took a quick trip up to Scotland to visit Branklyn Garden in Perth and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Branklyn Garden was developed by John and Dorothy Renton after they built their art and crafts style house on the side of Kinnoull Hill. We were told that the garden started in a more traditional amateur arts and crafts style but their passion and interest in plants quickly grew as they went further down the rabbit hole of having an interest in plants. Thanks to seeds collected by renowned plant collectors, they started to grow much more unusual and rare plants, and the garden grew to become an amazing mix of rock and woodland gardens. Until recently, the garden was managed by head Gardener Jim Jermyn. Branklyn now holds many national collections, including Meconopsis, which we were both very keen to see. I have a particular interest in woodland and understory plants, and so I found Branklyn to be absolutely incredible and would put it in my top gardens of the UK.
During our visit, we met Petra Palkova who very kindly showed us around and took us behind the scenes into the propagation area. I find it interesting to visit other gardens and nurseries to observe the many different systems that people use to grow plants, to see what works and why, and how I could implement this at Dixter or sometime in the future to grow happy, healthy plants and potentially find ways of growing the more unusual plant stock, where information is less widely available on how to grow it. Petra was growing a great selection of unusual plants from seed so it was fascinating to see how she does this.

Below are some photos from our time at Branklyn

- Meconopsis, Himalayan Blue Poppy -

After spending most of the first day at Branklyn Garden, the next morning we were up early to catch a bus to Edingburgh Botanical Gardens, where we met up with Josh Tranter, this year's AGS Trainee. We were shown around the alpine section and behind the scenes which was again truly fascinating as it was my first time seeing the behind-the-scenes growing set up like this at a botanical garden. To see the different systems and methods for growing such unusual alpine plants and geophytes was incredible.

- Left: I really like this method of creating a crevice garden, with the larger rocks split and positioned next to each other, rather than different pieces of rock made to look like cracks.-

May is possibly my favourite month at Great Dixter; the garden goes through many transformations from the start of the month to the end. If we look just at the long border, it starts the first week with the last hints of colour from the finishing tulips, before entering a lighter moment with the pale pink Weigela flordida Variegata in full flower, pale purple and white honesty flowers and a touch of yellow from the euonymus and Smyrnium perfoliatum. The frothy white flowers of cow parsley (Anthricus sylvestris) come into full flower in the second week and the foxgloves (Digitalis 'Suttons Apricot') add to the overall pale palette at this time, then as we moved into the third week the autumn sown ladybird poppies (Papaver commutatum 'Ladybird') that we planted through in march just start flowering adding a touch of the more vibrant colour that is soon to come. By the very end of May, the ladybird poppies are almost in full flower alongside Lupins and Gladiolus communis subsp. Byzantinus.

- 08/05/24 -

- 14/05/24 -

- 17/05/24 -

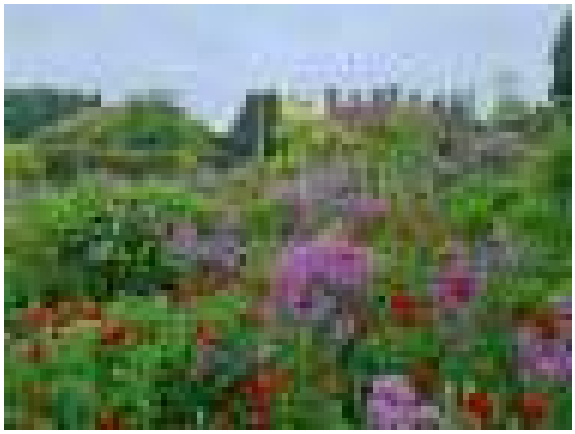
- 29/05/24 -

The rest of the garden goes through similar stages, the cow parsley rises above the perennials creating a cloth of white softness that makes an especially magical moment combined with a misty morning and low-lying sun. In the peacock garden, the Beths Poppies looked beautiful combined with alliums, cow parsley, euphorbias and giant fennel. The high garden stock bed that we completely replanted is coming along well, the Hesperis and poppies started to flower by the middle of the month and were in full flower through the last week, these add colour and interest to this area in between the new perennials that are developing.

- 18/04/24 -

- 15/05/24 -

- High Garden Stock Bed -



- 21/05/24 -

- 29/05/24 -

- Cow parsley in the Peacock Garden -

- Beths poppies in the Peacock Garden -

In the search for ways to increase the flowering period of a garden, Fergus took inspiration from the countryside and roadside verges and introduced cow parsley into the beds and borders at Dixter. I have been told that during Christo's time, it was in the meadow and outskirts but nowhere else. Working with freely self-seeding plants like cow parsley can be a bit of a risk, especially if you garden with less time or manpower, but with constant monitoring and editing the cow parsley creates a magic ephemeral moment that bridges the gap between the tulips finishing and the early summer flowers. The risk with cow parsley is that it can not only easily self-seed to make such high numbers of plants but also grows at a faster rate than the other garden plants at this time of year, so can overshadow and weaken anything around it. It is sensitive to temperature and conditions and even started growing through the winter this year due to the mild and wet conditions that we had. Its growth changes from year to year so you have to be careful about editing it out to the less risky spaces, the gaps between main groups of plants, and making sure it doesn't grow through the centre of a perennial, as once it establishes a tap root it is hard to remove it without damaging the plant it is in the middle of. To keep on top of it but still be able to enjoy its froth each year, we remove the plants from mid-May through June, gradually taking each one we see as it finishes flowering and starts to develop seed. Sometimes to keep on top of the work we even remove a patch before they finish, as the plants will have performed their main task of bridging the gap, and the garden would benefit from a cleaner, less busy appearance as we enter June. We are taught a few different techniques of removing them, either digging/pulling the whole plant with the root to remove it completely or just cutting it back, leaving the root to grow again next year. When we cut it back, other plants may have grown through or around its stem, so we don't always cut back to the base; stems that are cut to the point they are no longer visible provide support for the surrounding plants. Removing the stem could make the plants collapse or cause damage as we try to reach down to the ground to cut it.

The jobs this month have also included making pea-stick cages for Geraniums, finishing planting Centaurea ‘Red Boy’ in the High Garden stock bed, potting up annuals into large pots for pot displays, changing over the first few bedding pockets and areas of the garden that need refreshing, caring for the cannas and dahlias in cold frames that we have taken out of storage over the last couple months, caring for tender plants and cuttings that have been moved out of Naciim’s hothouse, sowing seeds such as Digitalis and Ageratum, and staking all the Thalictrum ‘Elin’ in the peacock garden.

All the students were also given the opportunity to spend some time behind the scenes at the Chelsea Flower Show, joining the KLC School of Design students on a tour around some of the show gardens. This was a really interesting experience for me to see the show before it officially opened, to be able to see a snippet of what goes on and how much goes into creating a garden or display. I came away with mixed emotions, inspired by the plants, people, and what we can achieve in such a small time frame, but also equally questioning the ethics of the show and the impact it has.

One of the first bedding pockets we have changed over is the Solar Garden bedding, the biggest of all in the garden. This is a big curving bed outside the front of the house, which had forget-me-nots (Myosotis sylvatica), Tulip Antoinette and Smyrnium perfoliatum. This spring display had some good moments as the sea of pale blue forget-me-nots gave a good understory to the patches of acid green Smyrnium and emerging yellow tulip buds, however, the tulip sadly failed this year, not coming up in the numbers that we planted, and not really fully developing or turning pink with age like it did so well last year. We methodically removed everything, dug over and cleaned up the area before planting in fresh seed-grown plants of Antirrhinum Potomac Scarlet, Rose, and Bronze in the shape of snakes, or tiger stripes, the main two colours being Scarlet and rose, with just an accent of bronze along one side of each ‘snake’. This planting was an important lesson for us students, as we all worked well and efficiently together, with no mix-ups of plant cultivars, and clean fast planting, however after standing back from the rush and excitement of this planting project, we noticed some small gaps had opened up from planting a few of the plants in a slightly different spot than it was laid out, and that due to having our boards laid out on the grass up to the edge of the bed, we didn’t quite plant up to the edge, which is a key lesson we are taught to do when bedding out. This was then corrected, and overall we were very pleased with the afternoon’s work and can't wait to see how it looks when in full flower.

- Ernie Weller