Monthly Report Aug 2024 – Ernie Weller

August marks the start of meadow season, as we get out the trackmaster, rakes, pitchforks and tonne bags once more to cut back and remove all the growth in the meadows. This is a real full circle moment as it is this very job that started our year back in early September 2023.

So far we have cut the Upper Moat, then on to the Lower Orchard, underneath the ash trees, the Front of House and Topiary Lawn. Due to this year having much higher rainfall than the previous two years, the meadows are much greener and seem more 'alive' than before. For this reason, when cutting the Front of House Meadow it was decided that we would leave one-quarter uncut, as we could still hear many crickets, and observed bees and common blue butterflies. Usually, the meadows are cut on roughly the same dates every year. An entomologist advised that Dixter's cutting regimes and technique don't need changing, as it has proven to be working in terms of increasing biodiversity. Although this is the case, it felt the right thing to do to not cut everything at once this year, and it is this mindset that I have really come to appreciate at Dixter, where we make a point of looking and assessing situations in the present and experimenting based on this. It may or may not be repeated next year, but it is important to always be 'close' to the garden and be free-minded enough to change up old habits in the spirit of experimentation and moving forward.

Another example this year is that we marked some of the yellow meadow ants hills before cutting with the trackmaster, so that we could go around them this time. Usually the trackmaster would go through the ant hills which leaves us with a completely flat soil under the meadows. Leaving some of the ant hills standing creates small micro habitats that have a positive impact on the dynamics of plant and insect species.

The Old Rose Garden/Exotic Garden:
Throughout this month I led a small team working in the Old Rose Garden/Exotic Garden to complete the last of the planting. This was a particularly rewarding experience and taught me important lessons in and how to divide up tasks and manage a space while allowing others to have creative freedom. By August, around 80% of the garden is already done, which left us with lots of smaller gaps that needed filling underneath the canopy, and a handful of larger areas to plant up. On the first two days, I worked with Adam Banks and Connie Hudson; we started by gathering all the leftover ferns and other suitable plants such as begonias and plectranthus from inside Naciim's Hot House and lining them out in rows organised by species underneath the Hovel roof next to the Exotic Garden. Lining each type of plant out together gives a clear idea of what material we have, so that when we look at a potential space it is easier to picture in our minds what can be used.

Begonia 'Burle-Marx' planted 23/07/24

09/08/24

I feel fortunate to have been involved in nearly every stage of planting in the exotic garden this year, it has been a real masterclass in how to create a garden space in this way using a mixture of hardy and non-hardy plants. The main focus is on foliage shape, colour and texture and how these react with each other, so when planting out the tender material we position every plant and compare it with its surroundings first to see if it stands out well and suits its location. During the early stages of planting, we could allow ourselves to be more relaxed in our approach, as there is plenty of ground space available, if a a plant doesn't work in one position we can take the time to move it around until it is perfect. Another key consideration to take into account is the light level, as many of the plants are coming out of winter protection and are sensitive to light. The canopy hasn't filled in fully so some areas of the garden still get long periods of full sun. While placing out we start with the shadier locations and observe how long it will be before the canopy fills in. Faster-growing plants like the Musa basjoo and Tetrapanax will fill in the airspace fairly quickly which will provide a much larger area of shade to plant in or allow us to plant something that is slightly less sensitive, knowing it will be protected from the light sooner. We continue in this way planting the biggest material first, until we get to the understory plants and then onto the finishing touches, filling as many gaps as possible. The understory plants are mostly planted in small groups and 'rivers' to give a much bolder effect using many smaller plants. Leggy plants such as Colocasia's can be underplanted again with something like Pteris cretica. At this last stage it is important to fill the gaps, but be mindful not to make the planting too 'bitty' as plugging in odd leftover plants could run the risk of diluting the effect of all the hard work that has been done before it.
Building my own tropical style garden is what got me into the hands-on side of gardening in the first place, so coming back to this style of gardening, learning the dixter way and going on to teach others has been thoroughly enjoyable.

View from in The Hovel, where we line out plants before planting.

I am writing this final report as it is nearing the end of the month, and my time at Dixter, and thinking back to when it all started in my own garden makes me truly appreciate all that Dixter has given me, from a multitude of opportunities and experiences to community and friends for life. I can't thank everyone involved in the running of Great Dixter and the Club 22 donors enough, my time here has completely changed my life, I will truly miss spending my days here, but I am going forward excited for what is next on this gardening journey.

- Ernie Weller