Monthly Report July 2024 – Ernie Weller

Another incredible month at Dixter has come to an end, this one being my second to last as a scholar. The garden is changing fast as we are swapping over many more bedding pockets, the perennial plantings are maturing, and the overall freshness and acid green tones of spring are fading. Although our aim is to keep the flowers and interest going for as long as possible, there are still always ups and downs throughout the year, and we saw the garden enter a small lull through July until the end of the month as the summer flowers and bedding of plants like the dahlias started to make a show. Some highlights in the garden included the Antirrhinum solar bedding combination which worked out really well, the pot displays, the sunk garden and the Orchard Garden. The Orchard garden had its big moment; the summer flowering perennials, Verbascums and Lythrums that we re-planted in January all bloomed at once and looked spectacular. This was a very interesting and valuable moment to observe to see how it all played out compared to our plans right back at the start of the year.

The High Garden Stock Bed:

The main task at the start of the month was to pull out some of the existing display in the High Garden stock bed and replant it to give another big show later in the year. This involved going into the bed and taking out the finished annuals and biennials like the poppies and foxgloves, whilst being careful the surrounding plants don't collapse into the voids we create. After we took out the finished plant material we then used bamboo canes to stake the plants in a way that left them looking as natural as possible.

This is an image of the High Garden Stock bed on the 28th of June, before any of the July work was carried out. Parsnip, Centaurea 'Red Boy' and a mix of poppies are flowering together. At this stage, the poppies are at the end of their flowering period, and it will be mostly these poppies that we pull out to create space between the other longer-lasting plants, to plant up these spaces with stock we have been growing on in the 'car park' and 'rhino pen'. This included Canna 'Erebus', Tagetes 'Giant Orange, and a mix of Amaranthus and cosmos.

- Pockets within the High Garden stock bed that have been carefully opened up, surrounding plants staked, and new plants put in to continue the show well in to and beyond August -

Another big focus for July was to 'clarify the picture' throughout the whole garden. This inolves observing each area and noting whats working, and what isn't and making edits accordingly. It also means keeping an eye on plants that are finishing soon or would benefit from being rejuvenated to provide a longer display. An example of this was when we spent two as as a team cutting back all the Geranium praetense and planting up the revealed space around each plant with Cannas and Amaranthus. The Geranium leaves had started to turn orange and although to me this was still looking good in combination with plants like Tritelia, a good lesson I learnt was that this is the best these plants will look, and at this time of year there are still many months of the season left, so any way we can prolong their period of interest is the best option. By cutting the geraniums right back to the ground, it promotes fresh green growth that will form nice mounds of even foliage and in just a few weeks and it will knit back together with the later perennials to provide a fresh backdrop. Again, our aim is to keep the garden as fresh as possible through to the end of summer, as although the brown hues of autumn are visually pleasing, there will inevitably be plenty of them to come, so it is best to hold it at bay through constant editing until then.

Rob and I have made good progress this year with our Car Park project, a lot has changed over the last 11 months. Along with building and installing new cold frames, we have successfully grown on lots of stock through its different stages until it is either big enough to be used in the garden, or given to the nursery for sale. Through July we did a lot of work moving on some of the well-rooted plants by working with the nursery team to see what stock they could do with more of, or any new plants they could sell. By moving this stock on in good time we created more space in the cold frames for rows of newly potted stock from a recent plant order. Learning to manage this space to grow on the stock in succession and provide plants with the conditions they need has been a valuable lesson and one I now feel confident to take with me going forward.

I was particularly pleased this year with the success we had from splitting and growing many different species of grasses, as this has proved more tricky in the past with rotting plants. Back in February, we dug up and divided all the large perennial grasses in the High Garden stock bed to reduce their size and create new stock. We then broke these divisions down into many smaller splits which we potted up and placed in the cold frames in our car park. Fergus gave instructions on how to get these to root and grow through the winter without them rotting like before and for the next two weeks they were kept as warm as possible in the frames, by opening them as little as possible. I then managed the airflow, temperature and water levels within the cold frame to provide the conditions they needed until they had grown enough top growth AND root to safely be moved out from under the glass. It was important to keep monitoring the roots as many of the grasses grew above the soil much faster but were still at high risk of rotting if removed from the glass and allowed to get too wet. I found this a particularly fascinating learning experience which will not only help me grow grasses in the future but has deepened my understanding of how to manage a cold frame to suit different plants' needs, which is a crucial part of gardening the way we do at Dixter.

Below is a selection of images from throughout the year showing some of the progress and stages of the car park project.

14/02/24 – New cold frames and ground reinforcement panels were added to provide more growing on space and improved access.

23/02/24 – Recently split plants such as crocosmias and heleniums inside a cold frame.

23/02/24 – Hardy annuals growing on in 7cm pots. A mix of Poppies and Larkspurs.

04/04/24 – Grass splits being lined out in the first frame.

05/07/24 – Well rooted Anemone ‘September Charm’ which took a considerable amount of time to root, despite having good top growth.

05/07/24 – Crates of freshly potted stock from the car park into 1 ltr pots ready to be sold in the nursery.

- Ernie Weller