

October Report

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It's been a very exciting month. I've been busy learning new things here at Great Dixter as we both wrap up the open season of the garden and prepare for the upcoming 2025 season. I've also been busy meeting new plants and people while off visiting other gardens. Being in the UK is such an exciting opportunity for any gardener at any stage in their journey. It feels especially inspiring and enriching for me as a young gardener who has just begun and I'm really valuing all the exposure to different gardens and styles of gardening.

In early October I was able to visit Gravetye Manor where head gardener, Tom Coward was really generous to welcome me for an afternoon tour. Tom is an old friend of Great Dixter's having known Christopher Lloyd personally and then working here for years before accepting the position of head gardener at Gravetye. Luckily for me he was so generous, enthusiastic and willing to share his work with a student of Great Dixter. The enthusiasm for plants was right on the surface, palpable and contagious. The garden at Gravetye is built into the landscape and much like Dixter the garden extends throughout the estate with plantings along the driveway, formal borders and flower beds, managed meadows, orchard, a walled kitchen garden and woodland. Tom described the layout in terms of the transitions from more formal to more natural throughout which I found really interesting. You have the highly cultivated flower beds which become looser, or wilder as the garden climbs up the rocky hillside to the north and away from the long border. This range in spectrum occurs again on a perpendicular axis as you head west and away from the densely layered and formal plantings near the house and through the Wisteria arbor. There you enter into the orchard meadow which is still very much gardened but has a much more naturalistic feel to it.

My visit to Gravetye was just after a bit of a cold snap and the color had begun to turn on many trees, shrubs and vines. Several vines, *Parthenocissus* and *Vitis* were completely ablaze and engulfing their hosts in bright red. Then there was the *Cornus* along the drive and the *Liquidambar* down past the meadow by the pond which were both just starting up with their individual ombres which each ranged in colors from deep purple tinged and plum red hues all the way to pale yellows. It wasn't just the color of these autumnal leaves but actually the color scheme all throughout the garden that left such a big impression on me. A full spectrum, but with certain combinations and colors strongly repeated and echoing throughout. For example so many combinations of reds and silvers, so much chartreuse and lime foliage and many varieties of pale pink and purple flowers. I absolutely loved the highly curated feel to the palette. There were so many combinations and moments of extreme vibrancy and saturation yet wonderfully balanced and enhanced by a massive range of silvers, tans, pewters and browns. I was very grateful for this lovely afternoon visit that wouldn't be possible without my student placement here at Great Dixter.



Gravetye Manor as seen from the terraced flower garden



Salvia confertiflora & *Atriplex halimus* a great example of the silver and red combinations in the garden.



Miscanthus plumes catching the light, *Aster* 'Little Carlow' spilling throughout
Acer palmatum smoldering red & calming blue green of *Euphorbia characias* cooling it
all down.



Erica vagans in prolific bloom. The color contrast of those pale pink flowers against the warm copper tones of the spent flowers, all set against the grey sky and stone manor just stunned me. I took some good advice to heart about spending my time admiring, touching, smelling, absorbing this plant.

There were so many more excursions to gardens this month. None were of less note or with less impact, though I realize now it may be a hefty tome if I tried to detail them all as I have above. So instead I'll list and briefly describe each, and use photos taken at each visit to speak for me. In chronologic order we visited the private garden Highlands in Uckfield and got a tour from head gardener Chris Brown. The same day we spent the afternoon at nearby Sheffield Park a National Trust site known for the autumn color. The site felt more like an arboretum than a garden with an incredible collection of mature trees. In mid October the garden team took a working trip to Woolbeding, a National

Trust Garden to work in the Silk Route portion of the garden which was designed by Fergus in 2022. We planted Foxtail Lillies in the portion of the garden representing the Tian Shan mountain range of Central Asia. And lastly this past weekend all of us students headed up to the midlands to visit Ashwood Nursery. We stopped along the way at Winterbourne Botanic Garden, a garden on University of Birmingham campus. It was well worth the visit, and we lucked out with gorgeous weather that afternoon. Between the stunning trees and their lovely glass houses I was glad we added it on to our itinerary. The following day we headed to John Massey's for a visit with him at his garden and home on site at Ashwood Nurseries. He gave us a detailed and amazing tour, answering endless questions from all of us students. His garden is exceptionally tidy and well kept. He was such a beautiful host to us all and an extremely generous and knowledgeable plantsman. I felt very fortunate to spend so much time with him in his garden, learning so many plants and techniques he uses to create such an immaculate place.



Highlands in Uckfield. This *Acer nigundo* was covered in dried, tawny and shimmering samaras that were so stunning. I loved this portion of the garden. Beside the tree was a mass planting of *Hakonechloa* aka Japanese forest grass with several *Aralia elatas* growing throughout and several clipped yew orbs giving a bit of an anchored weight and presence. The whole space had a really calming and peaceful effect on me.



Sheffield park on a sunny afternoon. This garden felt more like an arboretum with many incredible trees of note. Pictured here is the first of several anthropogenic lakes and in the distance the rusty orange of *Taxodium distichum* aka swamp cypress.



Silk Route Garden in the portion representative of the Zagros Mountain range. Peppered with naturalized self seeders, and featuring Michael McGowan, the 2025 Chanticleer scholar.

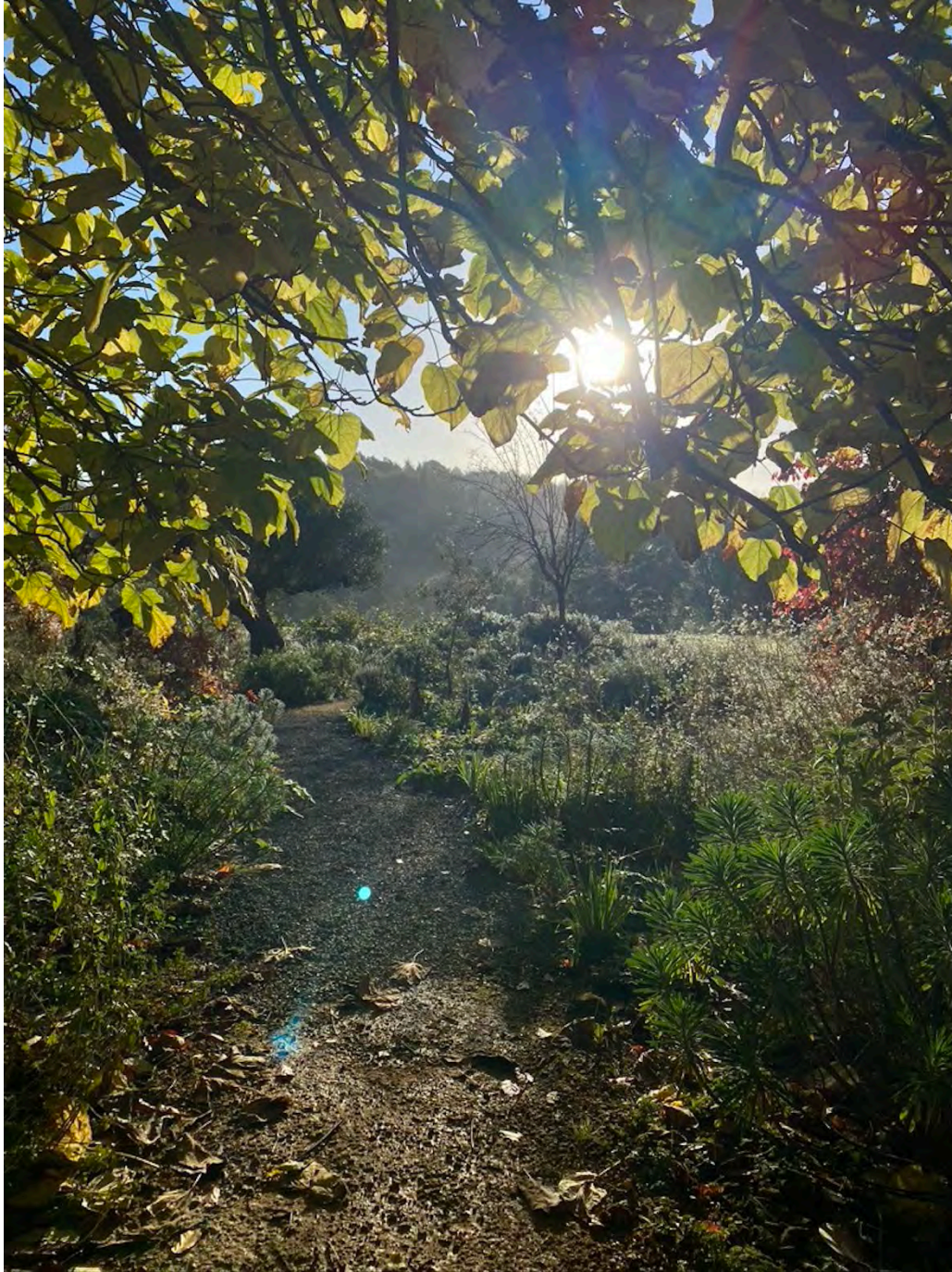


Photo of the morning light taken from the portion of the Silk Route representing Anatolia looking into the area defined as the Black Sea Coast and ultimately through to Istanbul.



View from inside the crown of a majestic *Nyssa sylvatica* aka black gum, at Winterbourne Garden.



One of several cedar glass houses at Winterbourne this one featuring a collection of carnivorous plants, including many species of *Sarracenia* and *Drosera*



Segment of John's winter garden with *Cornus* 'Annie's Winter Orange' & *Cotinus* 'Lilla' a dark leaved, dwarf smoke bush stealing all the attention when photographed. In person there were so many more amazing details to this bed including several *Acer tegmentosum* 'Valley Phantom' that have an amazing chalky grey bark that pops against the surrounding bright foliage.



Another angle of the winter bed- with *Panicum vergatum* 'northwind' and *Parrotia subaequalis*



John's garden. Filled with so many unusual and expertly cared for trees and shrubs. His whole garden felt so impressive, the thoughtful design, knowledge and creativity at work really had a high impact. So much attention to detail, care and love have gone in to make it the special place it is.

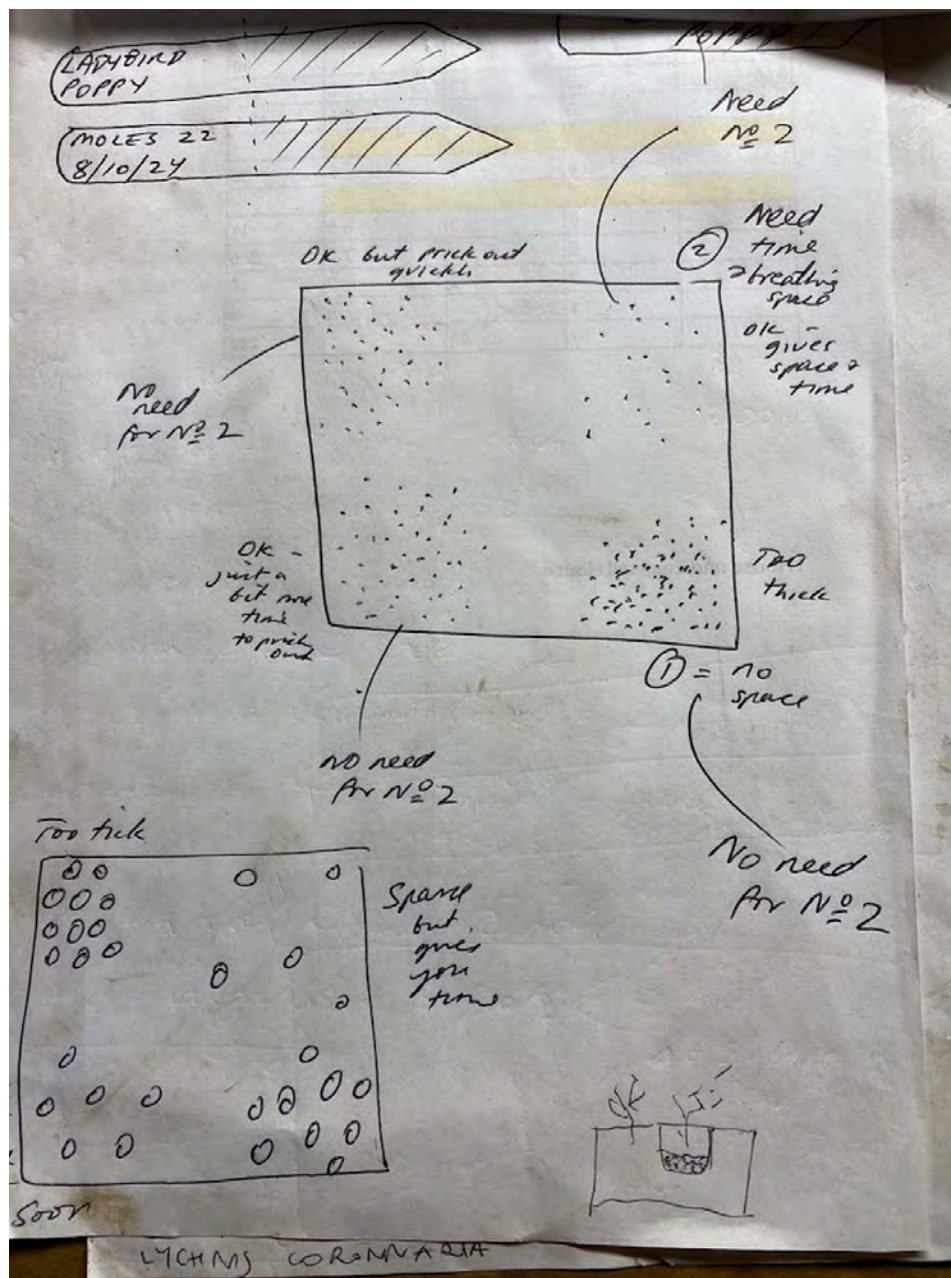
Back at Dixter the seed sowing of the cold hardy annuals has commenced. This, along with the cuttings that we've taken and potted up on to the heat bench, are much of the beginnings of the 2025 garden. It's been really interesting to learn about seed sowing now in the autumn. Here at Great Dixter many hardy annuals are sown now, in part to stagger some of the workload that would be impending in the often chaotically busy spring. I'll be interested to see how this approach translates to the much colder winters of Vermont and to do my own experiments in autumn sowing when I'm back home. The hours of sunlight and the temperatures here in the UK differ quite a bit. Here the weather is cool in October but with the use of cold frames it can make for slow but steady plant growth now with a tapering off of growth in the winter which is actually ideal, maximizing space and allowing many seedlings to happily stay in their small pots or cells. I've gleaned that growing the plants like this instead of in a heated greenhouse is actually not just possible but beneficial. Not only does it use fewer resources but this hard growing and less pampered approach can actually make for plants that are healthier, less diseased and that are more adapted and able to thrive when planted out in the garden come spring. I'm curious if it's accessible to recreate this temperate and mostly above freezing growing space in the cold and dry Vermont winters.

The autumn sowing seems to have many advantages for the plants and perhaps for the gardeners too. Seems like the earlier start helps gardeners to have a bit more time to assess their plans as the plants develop. I'm hypothesizing, but perhaps if there are germination problems or any seedling damage from pests it gives ample time before spring planting hits to resow important varieties or even change course in the bedding design altogether. Ultimately planning for the upcoming garden is a really important process for gardeners. It seems so obvious but it is a new idea to me to be doing that work throughout the year, by taking notes in the garden all season that will inform the editing process and by getting a jump on annual propagation in the autumn. Dispersing the work load and having good notes to inform your choices allows for a lot of attention to detail and thoughtfulness that can be challenging to afford all at once in the spring.

Each morning we open up the seedling cold frame, to check on the 2025 garden, albeit an embryonic and almost abstract form of the 2025 garden. We see which of the seed pots have begun germination. Ideally in a consistent layer across the top of the pot, not too crowded but with no space wasted. We take these pots out of the double cold frame and move them into a glass house where they'll get more light and slightly cooler temps. It's also a more visible and accessible place to be able to monitor their growth, as opposed to underneath two layers of glass. As soon as they need to be pricked out, weather because they're damping off or crowding one another out (often when they are still quite small) we transition them to their next pot or plug to let them grow on. Seed sowing has always felt akin to what I imagine it's like to be midwife, shepherding a garden into life by helping these baby plants to be born into the world.



Seed pots in the germination cold frame



Fergus' lesson on seed sowing the Dixter way

Taking stem cuttings of plants is another major part of the autumn work. It's something I've been really looking forward to developing a feel for while here at Dixter. To take a cutting, or fifty, from a single plant, essentially duplicating it feels like a magical super power. It's definitely a bit of an acquired skill for me. It's been great to become familiar with the process. Each plant I've been working with has been a little different, though often the principals remain the same. I feel like I'm getting familiar with some of the critical details that can lead to success. Some of these details include what type of

material to choose, the tender tips or the woodier stem. Or how much space to give each cutting in the pot and how deep to place your cutting into the potting medium. And equally important what potting medium is best suited for potting into. Many variables that ultimately influence your outcomes. So far, so good though. Many of our cuttings are beginning to send out new roots and I've definitely learned several lessons through observing both successes and failures. I'm enjoying this process immensely and hoping to keep developing both my knowledge and intuition, all to build on these foundational principals of stem cuttings.

I've learned so much this past month. I've also been able to get out and see so much and to meet so many incredible gardeners and plants people. It's such an immense privilege to be here doing this work and making these connections with plants, and people alike! I feel like I've really been able to make the most out of this October. It's a huge opportunity for me to learn so much and I just want to say how sincerely thankful I am to the Boruns for making it possible for me.