

## NOVEMBER

As we ticked over into November, the weather remained mild, and the borders bursting with colour. Even the dahlias, which usually tire themselves out at this point, still flowered freely. 'Spartacus,' which had been quite weak up until this point, its flowers stunted and failing to open properly, finally came into its true form, with huge, velvet red blooms, touched here and there with hints of orange. On the long border, *Salvia leucantha* hit its high note, with *Geranium* 'Red Admiral' matching its stride. Similarly, *Aster* 'Ezo Murasaki' came into its own in the High Garden. *Salvia leucantha* and *Aster* 'Ezo Murasaki' both share the trait of flowering so late they don't really make much of an impact while the garden is still open to the public; but we also garden for ourselves, and we relish having plants that still provide us with enjoyment once our gates shut. In terms of our work, November is a time of bulb planting at Great Dixter. The month gets underway with a bulb planting symposium, in which Fergus teaches the participants the Dixter way of using spring bulbs in a mixed border system, whether in dedicated bedding pockets, or incorporated into permanent planting.

With the group this year, we tackled the solar bedding, and then moved on to work through the Barn Garden. The Solar Bedding provides an example of how to deal with large scale bedding -- we board out the grass in front of the bed, and clear away the summer bedding, working from the front of the border on the area just ahead of us, and gradually moving more boards onto the cleared ground, to reach deeper and deeper into the bed. We then dig through the bed, removing any bulbs that may have escaped our spring clear-out, and breaking up the soil, while incorporating more organic matter as needed. The dahlias and cannas that we remove are processed, labelled, and stored for the winter. We then run forget-me-nots through the entire bed, and while the final effect will be a carpet of blue, we still try to lay them out, at this stage, with a degree of randomness to give the impression of naturalness. Only then do we lay out the bulbs (*Tulipa* 'Fly Away,' in this case), again deployed in a high/low density distribution, though with pretty thorough coverage. The final planting always happens with surprising speed -- it's the prep work that takes time, and we worked slowly through the bed with the group, Fergus explaining our approach each step of the way.

Working through the Barn Garden with the symposium group gave Fergus the chance to present examples of how we would treat smaller bedding pockets, more applicable to the home garden, as well as areas of permanent planting. I led a small group consisting of Adam Greathead scholar Connie and symposium member Ferris, and we tackled the phlox bed underneath the large wall-trained fig. It was an interesting area to deal with, as it's infested with bindweed, which has run into the roots of the perennials and grasses in the bed. As such, much of our task was clearing out the bed for a full re-set. We dug up and labelled the phlox, and set aside any bulbs or self-sowers we disturbed in the process. We then carefully dug through the bed to remove the bindweed. However, as we're unlikely to have got it all, we bedded out the area in forget-me-nots, which can easily be swept aside in the spring, when the bindweed emerges. At that point, we will have a second go at the bindweed, and then return the area to permanent planting. This dynamic approach, in which we take our cue from what each area needs, and responds to real-world conditions in the garden (whether that's bindweed, *Helianthus angustifolius*, or simply an area feeling a bit tired) is typical of Dixter, and it means things never get formulaic, but that we're always approaching the garden with curiosity and sensitivity, and trying to be responsive to its needs.

Midway through the month, our colleague Rob Flack organised for us to spend a day at Niwaki HQ near Shaftesbury learning how to prune pines in the Japanese way. This was fascinating, as it is a different approach to the one at Dixter, where we tend to let conifers do their own thing (with a corrective hand here and there). The technique we learnt at Niwaki is a Japanese method of pruning conifers to restrict their ultimate size, and to train them into an interesting shape. It is done in two stages. The first is *Midoritsumi*, or 'green picking,' which is carried out in spring, where the trees are 'candled,' a technique where the new growth formed on each growing tip is reduced by about half to two thirds; in addition, unneeded candles are removed leaving only two, or a maximum of three, at the end of each branch. In the autumn, much of the work is picking off the old needles from previous years, leaving a band of newer needles -- an activity known as *Momiage*. In addition to this, as these trees hadn't been pruned in a while, we also thinned out the candles, leaving roughly two per twig, and aiming to choose nicely branching, horizontal candidates, rather than strongly growing verticals. We also made some larger cuts, removing a few branches that crossed each other and contributed to a messy, congested look. It was really interesting to learn a new method of treating pines, and the careful, obsessive nature of the task appealed to me. It was a perfect day too, to be up a ladder, with bright skies and sun. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, and hope to be back for some spring pruning!

Towards the end of the month, I fled to warmer climes, and spent a weekend in Malta. I wasn't expecting it to be a plant-y holiday, and thought, in fact, that it would possibly be the worst time to go to the Mediterranean, botanically speaking. However, during my walks along the coast, I came across some tiny narcissi, and, my interest piqued, spent the evening perusing the excellent website 'Malta Wild Plants' by Stephen Mifsud. His catalogue informed me that I might expect to see *Narcissus deficiens* in flower at this time of year, as well as *Colchicum cupanii*. I made more of a botanical effort on my walks the following day, and saw great swathes of the narcissus -- its scent drifting in the light breeze -- with the tiny *Colchicum cupanii* popping up here and there among them. I'm fairly sure I also came across *Narcissus elegans*, which is a larger and more multi-headed species. I returned to Dixter revitalised by sun, sea swims, and whiffs of narcissus scent.















