

Work Experience: Great Dixter

The Percy Picton Memorial Fund

Monday 2nd July – Friday 6th July 2018

In the first week of July 2018, I spent a week working in the gardens at Great Dixter in Sussex. The Monday was spent going through the different areas of the garden including in the Orchard Garden, Peacock Garden, Blue Garden, Sunk Garden and Lower Terrace and collecting the ripe, black seed from *Smyrniium perfoliatum* with Dean's team. The seed was then going to be dried, bagged up and sold in the nursery or sown for the garden in future years. I was also pulling out the dying plant after collecting its seed and tidying the area. Throughout Great Dixter self sowing plants and plants from the surrounding landscape (which may be considered 'weeds' in other gardens) are actively encouraged to enhance the borders and the *Smyrniium* was an example of this. I also weeded through the borders pulling out weeds such as Bind Weed and *Galium aparine*. The soil is minimally disturbed to encourage self-sowers, rakes are not used in the garden as the use of these have been found to remove the self-sower seed bank



Figure 1: Great Dixter House and pot display



Figure 2: The Long Border

from the surface of the soil, so hands or Tickling Forks are used to agitate the soil and remove any footprints from the borders. On Monday, it was also explained to me that the pot displays in the Wall Garden and outside the front door are used to experiment with different colour and textural plant combinations which may then be used as planting in the borders.

Every morning the entire garden was swept and the path edges tidied of any broken and damaged plant stems and leaves ready for the day ahead.

On Tuesday, I started working on the Kitchen Drive with Michael's team. I spent three days helping clear up after the spring/early summer picture in this border and replacing with an autumn picture. I cut back the Cow Parsley, *Geranium pratense* and Oxeye Daisy right to the soil level and cut back the flowered stems of *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*. The Oxeye Daisy and *Geranium* cuttings were kept to hay lay on the cat garden for the seed to drop out, and once germinated will hopefully add to the mid-summer interest, which is currently missing in this area of the garden. Once the seed has dropped out the cuttings will then be removed and the existing vegetation cut with a strimmer, exposing bare patches of soil which will encourage germination.



Figure 3: The Topiary Lawn

I also helped to weed the area thoroughly on Wednesday. All seedlings were removed except for seedlings of *Viola*, *Myosotis* and Oxeye Daisy. When moving through an area every care is taken to limit the damage to the remaining plants by keeping still in one place in the border and working within reach before moving again.



Figure 5: Staked *Dorema ammoniacum*

I then helped to stake *Dorema ammoniacum* (syn. *Prionoscadium thapsioides*) which was flopping over with the weight of seed forming on its seed heads and lack of stem turgidity due to the dry weather. We inserted 3 chestnut stakes in a triangle close to the centre of the plant and wrapped tar twine around each stake starting in a clove hitch knot and then up and under each leaf node. In the afternoon I laid out and started to plant *Tagetes* 'Cinnabar' and *Amaranthus* 'Opopeo'. *Tagetes* 'Cinnabar' was one of Christopher Lloyd's favourites and is a tall,

branching marigold which fills up the planting space with fewer plants. I helped to lay out the *Tagetes* first and then the *Amaranthus* as natural as possible, no 3's, 5's or 7's, and totally random spacing, not overthinking or worrying about straight lines. When planting on the Kitchen Drive I added three pots of Lakeland Gold bracken compost to each planting hole to provide extra nutrients and moisture to aid establishment and I didn't tease the roots out of their root ball as the plants had been grown in a loam based compost.



Figure 4: Planting on the Kitchen Drive



Figure 6: *Cotinus coggygria* cv.

I continued working on the Kitchen Drive on Thursday, finishing the planting and also planting *Cotinus coggygria* cv. as an eye catcher at the start of the border. It was important that the *Cotinus* was planted at the same orientation as it was laid out in, so I made a mark in the soil at the front of the pot with my thumb before planting. In years to come the *Cotinus* will be pollarded each year once established to give maximum foliage colour.

I helped to top-dress the area with a thin layer of Lakeland Gold compost which was lightly forked in to the top surface with a Tickling Fork. Again, the thin layer and light forking is all done to encourage the self-sowers. The area was then watered well with a sprinkler and I continued cutting back on the other side of the Kitchen Drive. The word 'atmosphere' is often used in the garden at Great Dixter and everything is done to not spoil the atmosphere. For example, tools are hidden away from view in the area, where we were working and yellow or brown leaves or branches are removed as these are 'autumn colours'.

Finally on Friday, I spent the morning sweeping the path edges and cutting back or staking hanging/damaged stems in the Wall Garden, Blue Garden and Lower Terrace. In the afternoon I helped Coralie in the nursery to prick out *Zinnia* seedlings for the late summer/autumn picture in the Solar Garden. I pricked out *Zinnia* 'Benary's Giant Coral', Z. 'Old Mexico' and Z. 'Double Zahara Fire' into a loam-based, medium nutrient potting compost which I was careful not to over-compress as a loam-based compost does not spring back as much as a peat/coir based compost. I pricked the seedlings out into modular seed trays with the cotyledons at soil level to avoid the plant from becoming too leggy.



Figure 7: Pricking out *Zinnia*



Figure 8: The Solar Garden

The *Zinnia* will be used in a bedding pocket. These are successional plantings that are changed throughout the year to enhance the permanent planting. Every gardener in the garden is given responsibility for looking after a bedding pocket which they have planted and are also given the opportunity to pick a seed packet to be sown the following year. This gives each gardener a sense of ownership over the garden. The garden (pot displays, bedding pockets) is constantly being tweaked and enhanced and self-sowers and plants from the landscape are encouraged into the garden. Once something 'works' it is not done again so that the garden remains fresh and continuously evolves.

I really enjoyed my week working at Great Dixter and I learned a lot which I hope to take forward with me in the future; to see the good in every plant, to be generous with plants and your time and to experiment in the garden with plant combinations and forms, and to not be afraid of failing. It was a privilege to experience working with very passionate and skilful gardeners and understand why the garden is the way it is. As I understood the thought processes behind decisions made in the garden, the garden made more and more sense. It was a fantastic week.



Figure 9: The Sunk Garden

Notable Plants



RANUNCULACEAE
Thalictrum 'Elin'
"Meadow Rue"
In the Barn Garden



LYTHRACEAE
Lythrum 'Rosy Gem'
On the Lower Terrace



HYDRANGEACEAE
Schizophragma hydrangeoides
"Japanese Hydrangea Vine"
On the wall of the house at the end of the Kitchen Drive



ASTERACEAE
Erigeron annuus
"Annual Fleabane"
Self-sown throughout the garden



GENTIANACEAE
Gentiana lutea
"Yellow Gentian"
In the Barn Garden (just one!)



ASTERACEAE
Coreopsis grandiflora
"Cutting Gold"
"Tickseed"
In the pot display with Cornflowers in the Wall Garden



HYDRANGEACEAE
Hydrangea 'Ayesha'
In the Barn Garden



ASTERACEAE
Cichorium intybus
"Chicory"
In the Blue Garden



IRIDACEAE
Dierama pulcherrimum
"Angel's Fishing Rod"
On the Lower Terrace and self-sown throughout the garden