

James Horner  
For the Merlin Trust Fund  
Hokkaido, Japan July 2013



-Myself happily exaggerating the scale of *Angelica ursina* in a roadside ditch

I don't know when I began to take an interest in plants, but know it was long before I actually started gardening. As a college boy living at his parent's house in a North Yorkshire town, I searched for escapes, taking my bike on rides or walking out to the river Wharfe, through

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favourite woodlands in springtime, I just enjoyed the atmosphere, the sounds, being observant. Much later and following graduation from Glasgow School of Art I worked briefly on an Argyllshire estate and had a more momentous revelation, which brought me to realise how working with nature could fulfil my grasping for a physical medium with which to be creative. This brought me back to Yorkshire, where I began a two and half year beginners stint with the Leeds Parks department, befriending the head gardeners around I quickly garnered as much knowledge as possible to be awarded the Christopher Lloyd scholarship at Great Dixter, where I have become part of the permanent gardeners team.

I first met Midori Shintani in October 2011. I had just begun the Christopher Lloyd scholarship, she was in England to see gardens and visit the David Austen rose nursery. As the head gardener of an exciting new project linking Dan Pearson design studio with Japan I was keen to welcome her. I distinctly remember cutting off from the back breaking work of hacking out an established bamboo from an orchard garden stock bed, not on my own but with two other gardeners and by process of splitting the base with an axe, still I thought she must think we are crazy. I hadn't seen any bamboo growing outside of gardens, like beside farmer's rice fields mixed with Cryptomeria. Then this is what I did see when coming down to land at Narita airport, Tokyo, three years later. From the air they looked like massive fern fronds, and I had a delightful moment as I drew closer to the ground and realised their true form. Japan for the first time, even Asia for the first time. Travelling can be life changing, transformative and as a gardener, a plantsman it is an education to study native plants in a foreign country, plants cultivated in our Western gardens growing in their natural habitat. So I relished the opportunity of a gardener's exchange programme, between Great Dixter and the Tokachi Millennium Forest Project on the most Northern island of Japan, Hokkaido. Making my trip there in July 2013, whilst later in September the same year millennium forest head gardener Midori Shintani is set to have her likewise extraordinary experience in England gardening and garden visiting with the Great Dixter staff. We both agree in the merits of exchange programmes and our aim is to establish a special relationship between the two gardens so that may gardeners wish to make a similar experience in the future, there lies an existing template and familiar communication lines. Our two gardens both show characteristics of English plantsmanship, of painterly planting, but one is modern and with a strong design identity whilst Great Dixter has an existing garden history. Yet obviously both share the concern for presenting a public garden of excellence and so our objectives for the exchange were to emphasis technique and share skills, inspire and form a dialogue between the gardeners of the two gardens. This sharing of my experience with the Dixter staff will primarily be made through a presentation with photography and expression. Whilst all the passing of skills was direct, made by joining the garden team and working with them for four weeks. In short it was a very rewarding time. Yet herein I wish to describe the qualities of my experience and express gratitude to the Merlin Trust for awarding me with funds towards my travel expenses.



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-The Meadow Garden, Tokachi Millennium Forest

The forest project differs from Dixter in that it is still in its infancy, it is only 6 years since plans and designs were made life sized. The imperative came from Mitsushige Hiyashi, owner of the Tokachi Mainichi newspaper company. He in retirement now with his son's running the business is turning his attention to other projects. The ambition of the forest project is to offset the carbon footprint of the newspaper company whilst being a public garden. The magnificent site it occupies is in the foothills of the Hidaka mountain range, a range with an apex of 1500 metres. The landscape design attempts to take visitors through native woodlands to gardens and to farms, and to an earth garden where people have the option of riding Segway, the vehicle alternative to walking further towards the mountains and the public's highest viewpoint Millennium Hill. Thus there is never an attempt to block or out muscle the mighty nature which dominates the atmosphere. English garden designer Dan Pearson was commissioned to draw up plans for the garden areas working with local landscape architects Takana Landscape. His renowned feature is the meadow garden, a large scale open garden with informal boundaries of native shrubs and trees. There is also an English rose garden co-designed by Michael Marriot of David Austen Roses and a cutting garden of raised beds recreated every year by creative head gardener Midori Shintani, she trained in Stockholm at Rosendahl garden and loves productive growing. Together with the native forest these three elements made the fabric of my learning. All of which felt familiar and not exactly Japanese. To counter balance this desire for experiencing Japanese gardens I planned into my itinerary a week of visiting temples and parks in Kyoto and Tokyo. This came after my four weeks in Hokkaido and ended my journey. I shall now give a brief

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summary about each aspect of the forest project before going on to the additional relevant experiences like visits to native flora habitats and the gardens of Kyoto.



-Path through the forest, *Aruncus diocis* in flower

#### The Forest

Visitors encounter the forest immediately, there flows through it several wide tarmac paths and slightly off piste wooden decking platforms whenever the way crosses water. Every attempt has been made to make visitors aware of the richness of this forest's flora. Handmade signs with photos and Japanese names stand by the plants of interest. There is intention to produce a handbook illustrating the flora, whereas one already exists for the meadow garden plants. The tree canopy is made up of deciduous lime: *Tilia japonica*, oak: *Quercus mongolica* var. *grosseserrata*, elm: *Ulmus lacinata*, birch: *Betula platyphylla* var. *japonica* and ash: *Fraxinus mandshurica* var. *japonica*. Then there is an exotic and thorny undercanopy of *magnolia obovata*, *kalopanax septemlobus*, *aralia elata*, *hydrangea serrata*, of which the flower colour varies from white to pale purple. At the time I was there the forest floor was dramatic with the huge architectural first year leaves of many *Angelica ursina*, the rounded large leaves of *Petasites japonicus* and the arching herbaceous *Aralia cordata*, the spring shoots of this plant are eaten as tempura along with bamboo and hosta shoots. An early observation which is relevant to plant selection when wanting to create a sense of drama in a garden, is the use of plants of different leaf sizes, so that there becomes a layering and a depth. Under and piercing through these large muscular plants are *Veratrum album* and *maackii*, *Filipendula kamtschatica* and *yezoensis*, *Aruncus diocia* and *Cardiocrinum giganteum*, the berried spadix of *Arisaema japonica* and a sprinkling of *Aquilega buergeriana*.

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Whilst *Veronicastrum sibiricum* and *Hemerocallis dumortieri* are to be found on the forest edges. The splendidly numerous ferns are *Mattuecia struthiopteris* and *Osmunda regalis*. Below all and thriving in a life of deep shade, coolness and soft organic matter is *Pachysandra terminalis*. Two widespread undesirables are *Artemisia montana* and *Erigeron annuus*, the latter was shocking as at Dixter we grow this plant from seed, hundreds of them treated as a hardy annual to sprinkle through many parts of the garden borders. The other dilemma is *Sasa kurilensis* which unless restricted and annually attacked will smother the forest floor preventing the more delicate flora from seeing light in early spring. Repeatedly this is strimmed down to nothing every winter and the results are rapid, the following year yields *Trillium*, bulbous anemone, primula, glaucidum, all this I saw evidence of where the seed had already formed. Another trial technique to barrage the *Sasa* is to fence an area and watchfully allow the estate's horses to graze from autumn, in an area this has already been practised the horses strip the leaves but do not eat the whole stem, still the plant is weakened and light gets down to the floor. I say watchful as once all the *Sasa* has been taken the horses will start to turn their hunger to tree bark. The few days we worked in the forest were undoubtedly my favourite. The work was simple but the environment astounding and very different from garden work, in the forest there is little creation and you are more acting as steward, this frees one just to admire the movement of nature and be completely aware of nature's rhythms, be surrounded by and able to observe all other nature than just plants, the wildlife and their habitat is right around you. The work entailed cutting back for example *Veratrum*s, those near the path which were browning too early in the season for acceptable display. And also just to keep the path wide enough for comfortable passing between visitors. Certain plants obvious lean too greatly into the void of the pathway and never would Shintani consider staking in such a natural environment, as she feels it would interfere too greatly and wrongly present the gardener's presence. We weeded the wooden pathways of all seedlings, this detail is crucial to emphasise the careful, apparent but discrete management. We also did a large swathe of editing on the woodland edge, removing those undesirable two: *Erigeron annuus* and *Artemisia montana*. This will make such a slight difference to alleviate the seeding problem but made the presentation of the more desirable native species of *Veronicastrum*, *Filipendula*, *Eupatorium* and *Thalictrum* more definite. We waited for days thick with mountain cloud when a light drizzle fell to transplant native plants, the largest part of the forest is far from where most public visitors only go, and so Midori is keen to improve, by enriching the diversity of plant types by sensitive intervention in the areas which are most encountered. It was wonderful to search for the certain plants we wanted, then dig them up, feel the soft organic matter their roots thrived in and then make them a new home elsewhere, we didn't add any compost just watered after planting, I have moved before plants in full flower so was confident enough to move ferns and thalictrums in the Hokkaido summer. In the mornings the forest buzzed with the static song of thousands of cicadas and after twilight the small ponds croaked all night full of frogs. To walk through the forest everyday was a delight, especially on the hottest days, when the natural air conditioning streams kept the air cool.



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-A cold water stream cooling the forest

For visitors wandering through the forest, there is a restaurant (serving traditional sorba noodles made from Fagopyrum, buckwheat) along the way before coming to an opening where ahead is the Earth garden, a sculptural landform space, distinctly spacious and clear, this lies immediately between the first forest, the meadow garden and the from here the heightened mountains. It is a vast breathing space where the mountains could be viewed.

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-The Earth Garden with the Hidaka Mountain range

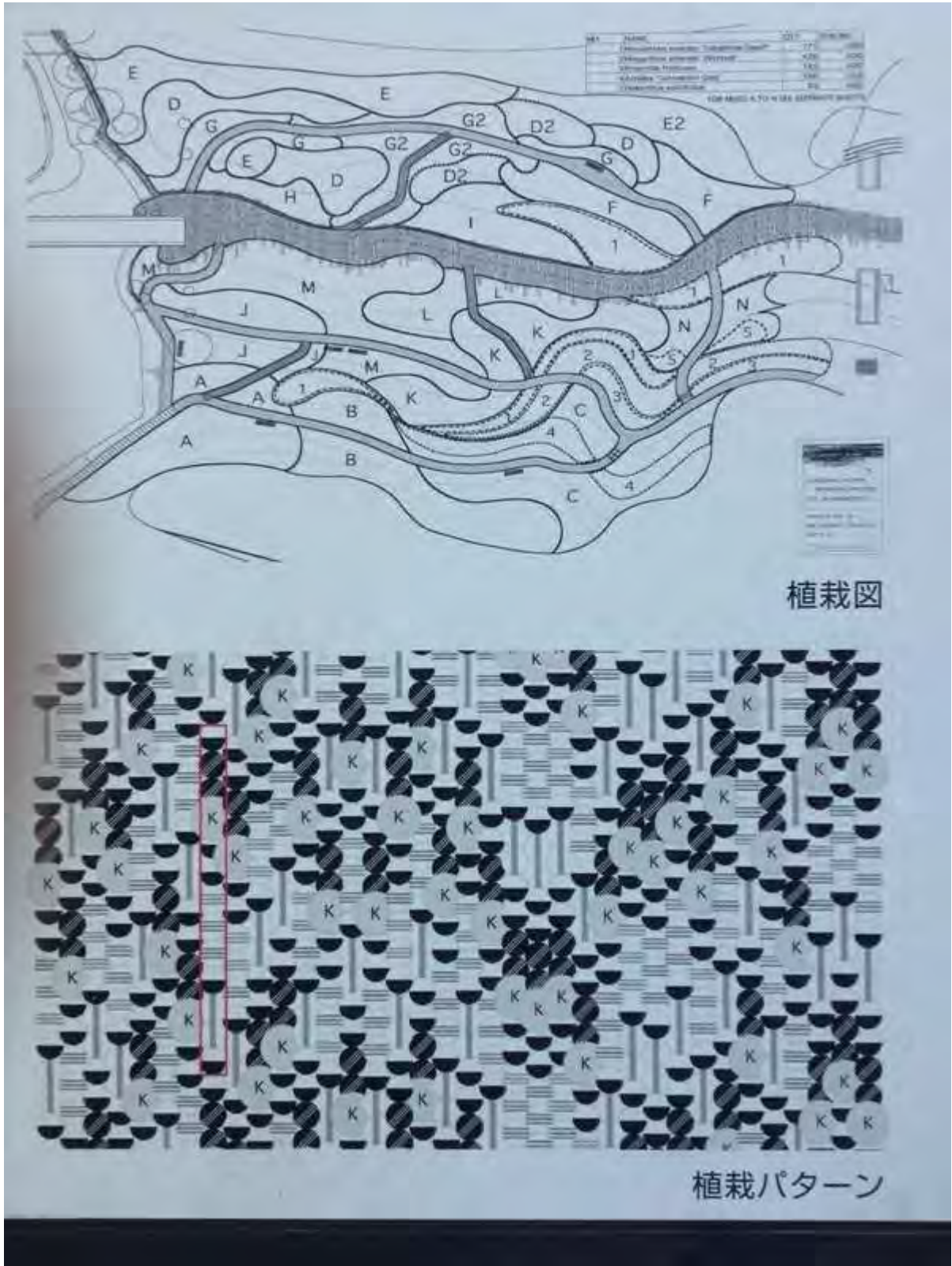
#### The Meadow Garden

I was intrigued to garden this space because it is so unlike the way I garden at Dixter, largely an ornamental plantsman's garden where everything is hugely intentional. In comparison the meadow garden's quantity of plant material is stripped down, there is not the same emphasis on continual and successional floral display and the shapes, mixes of plants are both broader and more organic, plus it is largely herbaceous plant material. The previous ten years has brought naturalistic gardening to the forefront of horticulture so I was eager to feel my way around such an example and measure the work load up against Dixter's high maintenance demands. I was shown Dan's layout plans, which dissect the whole garden into organically shaped sections, each section containing a mix of plants. An example mix is *Hakonechloa macro*, *Houttuynia cordata*, *Galium odoratum*, *Maianthemum dilatatum* and *Kirengeshoma palmata*. For the sunnier side an example mix is *Baptisia australis*, *Knautia macedonica*, *Sanguisorba tenuifolia* var. *alba* and *Cimicifuga racemosa* var. *cordifolia*. On paper the mixes appeared like scientific diagrams, each plant is represented by a symbol and these are shown in an example matrix, done for guidance at the time of initial planting. What is most crucial to Dan's design is plant selection, both choosing plants which are strong enough to compete at close quarters to others, to self seed or otherwise renew oneself and remain vigorous, but then not choosing plants which are too vigorous and cause the depletion of others and with it masses of garden work to prevent this, swaying back the balance. It is still early for this garden and though it has received a renowned award both Dan and Midori continue to evolve the planting by continual communication via email and annual visits by Dan to Hokkaido. My visit was coincided with Dan's in order for me to have a good opportunity to meet him



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and take part in the day of discussion in the garden. This relationship between head gardener and designer is something unfortunately rare and very special in this circumstance. I guess that establishing such a relationship is dependent on willingness and individual's personality.





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-Dan Pearson Studio's meadow garden layout design (top) and (below) example of planting matrix



-A close up of a pollinator upon *Dianthus carthusianorum*

The design's open style and naturalistic planting don't attempt to over rule the monumental wider landscape, but try evoke the same spirit. Whereas a project with naturalistic planting such as Piet Oudolf's New York high line might be appreciated for its free flowing contrast to the urban landscape here the garden settles with the landscape. The gardeners work here is quite similar and Midori even states that the work of the forest influences her methods in the meadow garden, so editing and weeding is a large part, observing the more vigorous players and keeping them in check. Just like herbaceous border perennials have to be split to be kept vigorous, this is performed on rotation in the early spring. Hokkaido has a winter of 6 months, with certain snow cover, a snow layer which helps protect plants from temperatures of minus 25. We did some planting into areas which have free spaces, Shintani grows a lot from seed, her travels and Dan's plant knowledge have meant many plants are desired from the European market, few of which are commercially available in Japan, so Jelitto's seed catalogue is a treasure trove and she also has stock beds where plants are trialled, watched and potentially found appealing for inclusion in the meadow garden. An interesting discussion over the meadow garden became why and if we should restrict plants to their original mix, but this can not be a general discussion where one rule is adequate for each plant, certainly there exists an independent movement of plants but for large perennials such as *Eupatorium maculatum*, a clumping plant who's offspring vary in dark stem colour, and

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grow over 6ft tall and 4ft wide, allowing those free rein all through the garden would result in a loss of views, only perhaps 8 clumps are necessary for the whole space. Whereas something smaller and stoloniferous like Houttuynia which though travels far and wide will potentially not out muscle it's companion Hakonechloa but maybe would Pulmonaria. So constantly the gardener is required to learn about the plants, who is strongest, who needs checking and who needs support by making a small bit of breathing space. The garden therefore is managed for an aesthetic balance, but why not when the houttuynia runs into a certain neighbouring mix, isn't it let to go? Midori's most adequate answer was that then all intent of planting combinations dissipates. But I believe that is true in certain circumstances but never always and perhaps if Midori and Dan were working everyday together I no doubt imagine the garden would have evolved far beyond it's first, possibly restrictive beginnings.



-Hakonechloa macro, Geranium phaeum, Pulmonaria and Houttuynia

### The Cutting Garden

Stationed between the meadow garden and the Rose Garden and positioned near to a cafe, this productive area is made up of many raised beds. Here Midori grows flowers she cuts for vases which decorate the cafe, too she grows salad crops, herbs and vegetables, used in the kitchens. Clearly Midori enjoys her freedom to grow whatever she feels right in the cutting garden, it's order is in contrast to the roaming nature of the forest and the meadow garden. From her training at Rosendahl she has great knowledge about floristry and I enjoyed so much to make arrangements alongside her, and twice we sat down with a very interesting pile of books from her collection and she introduced me to the talent of French florist Christian Tortu and tomato enthusiast Amy Goldman. This exchange is too rare and vitally inspiring,



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far too often gardeners live in a vacuum where they work is not heightened to the level of art, but with majestic books some acknowledgement is celebrated. I enjoyed this maintaining process, the routine of deadheading, we shared the different ways of staking plants, of tying up with string. I even planted *Tagetes 'Cinnabar'*, seed of which Midori had received on a visit to Dexter and grown for the first time this year.



-Midori and I arranging for the cafe

### The English Rose Garden

My period of work experience at the forest project coincided with the opening of their first rose festival. An event to attract visitors to the garden during the peak of the roses' first flowering. A part of the farm which adjoins the cutting garden and similarly is defined by wooden raised beds, the rose garden is impressive, the roses having only been in the ground for 14 months. Supplied by David Austin Roses, whom have a branch office and garden in Osaka, Japan. The selection was made by Dan and Michael Marriot, chosen for hardiness, fragrance, quality and colour of flower, the roses are planted in blocks, so the deep maroons, dark pinks graduate into apricots and whiskey, further into soft pinks, miracle yellows and dainty whites. Nearer to the shrub planting of *Sorbaria sorbifolia*, *Salix argentea* and *Pinus montana* are species roses, moss roses like 'William Lobb' and other old roses looking tremendously healthy, in a few years time these will create a romantic thicket which will exaggerate the shrub layer's wildness. A frequent job was then to deadhead the roses, something I don't do a great deal of and so I did enjoy becoming more accustomed to this work and also with David Austin's celebrated roses. By the time I ended my stay most of the roses were over their first flowering but with many buds ready for a second effort. Michael did visit and gave two lectures out in the rose garden, both of which I attended, we got to know one another and clearly his passion for plants goes wider than roses when one evening

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at dinner he tells me about the forest floor plants he discovered I seemingly missed after being here then already for three weeks. What strikes me as crucial to my meeting of people such as Michael and Dan is that I was given time to be with them and stood on my own, it is quite difficult to do this when working as under gardener with lots to do in one's own place.

The garden is completely organic and to handle an infestation of Japanese beetles on the roses, mainly the old roses and in particular *Rosa glauca* in the meadow garden we simply picked hundreds off and drown them in a bucket of water. A maxi crop seaweed based fertiliser is used as a spray onto the leaves and soil through the growing season, whilst well rotted manure will be used as a mulch in autumn. The roses are pruned in late October so that they can be three times covered with fleece before the snow quilt falls. The new English roses by David Austin are quite simply pruned back to a third. Some perennials like *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' and *Perovskia atriplicifolia* are used to soften the ends of some of the rectangular raised beds.

#### Visits to other gardens

On several occasions we took advantage of our day off by piling into the car all four gardeners to see a Hokkaido garden or a site of special interest Midori knew particularly to see wild flowers. Recently before I came to the forest project there had been a staff change, and Masa had joined the small team, so with him being new I really felt that these occasions were not only of benefit to me but bonded Midori and her two gardeners. There were places I wished to visit, a public park created by sculpture Isamu Noguchi in Sapporo. The garden of two gardeners I knew previously from their own exchange to work at Dixter earlier this year. But too these were places which certainly Masa had not been before having recently moved from Tokyo. The most moving visit was to another forest garden, a place where Ezme has devoted huge amounts of time to preserving and making excellent his slice of the world where he believes his ancestors to have dwelt, his name meaning pure water. He worked for another forest garden owned by a sweet company also in Hokkaido, there seems something of a trend happening here, but he now spends most of his time on his own forest. He is a quiet and private man, how I experienced him but then he opens his forest garden to over a thousand visitors in the spring and summer. He also has built a traditional styled house and two beautiful wooden outbuildings, with thatched roofs and tatami mats, these levitate over the forest floor and all the buildings are near the water course which doesn't run fast but gently here, and the whole atmosphere is one of peace, here I felt I had a brush with an individual whom strives for something individual but not unlike what the zen buddhists pursue. I was taken a back and so happy to be present that day, now recalling this place existing is enough to make me smile. I pointed out a plant I knew, actually only the day before departing England I had exhibited it in the Northiam horticultural show in the category foliage plant grown in a pot. It won first prize, and once he recognised my interest in this uncommonly appreciated plant I think we made friends, later he dug up a plant for me and the forest project where this Japanese native *Boehmeria sylvestris* is not found.

#### Visits to see other native flora habitats

In the same day we ventured further towards two coastal meadows. With Masa I had shared an interest in birds, at the forest there is the most bizarre bird noise I have ever encountered, that of a diving snipe he told me. From then he was hopeful that together we would encounter perhaps red crowned cranes, which that day we did, and then with his luck we saw a white tailed eagle also, flying directly over our vehicle. But the meadows were full of *Iris ensata* and *Angelica sachalinensis*, *Rosa rugosa* and *Thermopsis chinensis*, a plant Midori had had to



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remove from the meadow garden for being too rampant. Also I identified *Patrinia scabiosifolia*, something we grow from seed and sell in the Dixter nursery. From both Fergus Garrett and Dan Pearson, I have repeatedly heard them express how important it is to study plants in the wild, Beth Chatto too would strongly agree. And here in Japan I was seeing everywhere plants in the wild. Seeing where they successfully grow, and with which companions, increasing this knowledge so as a gardener I can make intelligent decisions over placing the "right plant in the right place".



-In good and knowledgeable company

Additional interests: Sakan

Of course a trip anywhere is not complete without sampling the local cuisine, this I did with relish. But one evening inside a restaurant I was also struck in appreciation of an earthen wall, constructed with inlaid trees. I enquired with Midori about this, she told me it was a very traditional form of wall construction known as Sakan. Upon a mesh structure a mixture of soil, sand and often natural fibres is applied and finished with gestural movement and contrasting textures. Generously as ever Midori took up my interest and days later appeared with several magazines featuring sakan work and told me we had two appointments to see examples of work in a hotel and a guesthouse. This leads me towards describing my strong impulse towards Japanese aesthetics and desire to team my work exchange with a time spent in Kyoto so I may visit temple gardens. I wanted to see these as I am intrigued by Japanese culture, eastern gardens, religious aids, the exquisite craft and carpentry and the horticultural techniques. I myself am working closely with garden designers, I hope this will teach me about the design of space and then with my horticultural experience I hope that if my career

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turns this way I can make successful gardens. So to see gardens like Ryoan-ji and the Mirei Shingorei designed gardens around the abbot's hall of Tofuku-ji temple was a precious gift and for both I was the second occupant of the morning, so I could get the best of these spaces as they were intended to be occupied in undisturbed quiet. Both blew my mind and are beautiful spaces where the qualities of nature are so pointed. The dry gardens made entirely of stone do not grow how are much rain falls upon them, there are forever still, any growth, any weeds are cast out, I had the thought that maybe the raking of the gravel could have even began as a way of disturbing the spread of moss in particular. So over this space of light and stillness they is no distraction of even the wind trembling a leaf, a bird landing on a branch, the rain dipping a leaf, there a monk can focus perhaps most strongly. The buildings which felt well built from strong wood felt most sheltering, and this too is important to give the occupant the faith to relax completely, so whilst the rain slandered down and thunder rumbled skies the morning I was at Ryoan-ji I felt strangely glad so was the atmosphere to exaggerate the secure place the temple is.



-The Hojo dry garden at Tofuku-ji, a modern zen garden designed by Mirei Shigemori in 1939

I now look forward to Midori's own visit to England, when she shall learn I am sure many new skills, plants and friends. The horticultural world is a fantastically friendly and open network and I am happy help begin a new prospect for gardeners familiar to the two gardens. The wealth of flora, technique and knowledge across the two gardens is wonderful, and accessible, thank you for kindly supporting and providing me with the backing to experience Japan for the first and hopefully not the last time.



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