

Design, manipulate and implement the winter schedule: the head gardeners how-to guide Held at Great Dixter 28-30th October 2024

Course Description

This 3 day course led by Fergus and the garden team will take you through the planning and practical steps needed to prepare a complex garden like Great Dixter for the spring and summer display. The course will illustrate how work is prioritised over the winter to take pressure off in the spring.

Topics covered include:

- Composting
- Soil preparation
- Feeding
- Weeding
- Thinning self-sowers to edit the picture,
- Working off boards
- Splitting, dividing and planting,
- Timing of seed sowing,
- Pricking out
- Choosing annuals to add to the display
- Working effectively in the rain
- How to push and pull work to be efficient with your time.
- The varied use of bulbs in the garden
- How to deal with bulbs after flowering
- What to consider when buying bulbs.

The course will culminate in laying out a long season border and working in layers to extend the season.

OUTCOMES

The course encompassed so many elements of Autumn / Winter work in the garden to get a head start for the year to come. This will strongly feed through to my work at Slake Manor and in all of the gardens where I work.

DAY 1 - Effective winter time management



- Working off of boards / how to work effectively in the rain showed how simple tricks can create a much more efficient system with minimal soil compaction.
- The use of canes to mark out perennial groups.
- Equipment and tools - always having crates or other containers with you for editing self sowers. Buckets for weeds etc.
- Handy tools that save time and do particular jobs effectively. Tools such as the tickling fork which helps with accuracy when mulching in narrow areas between plants.
- Fergus showed us how an area like the long border is worked through in Autumn / Winter. It will have been assessed through the year to decide what plants to add or edit. Leaving detritus piles at the back of the border for beneficial insects.
- Continuously assessing as you work through a border - looking at winter structure. Cutting down in stages to leave interest.

DAY 2 - Propagation, compost and Meadows



- The nursery team showed us the potting mix used for seeds / cuttings and Fergus went through the different ratios for various scenarios. Discussion about an
- Division / Dahlia and Canna splitting
- Format for Nursery plant labels
- Seed sowing and pricking out. Correli demonstrated with Beths Poppy.
- Cutting times for Dixter meadows. Group discussion on how nutrients affect diversity - new research.

DAY 3 - Succession planting and bulbs

- Laying out a border for long interest
- Bulb selection and suppliers
- Planting combinations (e.g Alliums around Japanese Anemones to limit spread) where timing (either flowering or foliage development) benefit each other and the overall picture.
- Looking at how the picture changes throughout the year with combinations such as Cornus alba 'Aurea', Phlox paniculata 'Long Border Mauve', Miscanthus sinensis 'Strictus', Anemone x hybrida 'Honorine Jobert' and Helenium 'Sahin's Early Flowerer'. Adding in Cyclamens, Galanthus, Ruscus and Gladiolus.

NEXT STEPS

The whole course was very inspirational and, in particular for me, the propagation element confirmed that I would like to explore more courses on the subject. Great Dixter holds a specific day course which is something I would like to pursue. Special Plants Nursery also hold similar courses.

The compost and soil element is also an area where I would like to develop my knowledge. The work of horticulturists like Joshua Sparkes (who has worked with Dixter in the past) at Birch Farm in Devon is of great interest. In particular the Spring natural farming workshop - Focus on the soil.

I am looking into starting the RHS Level 3 Certificate in the Principles of Plant Growth, Garden Planning and Applied Propagation this year.

Lesley Nichols - Merlin Trust Grant Report

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Example work schedule for the year

