

Propagation Course for Gardeners course at Great Dixter September 2025

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Background:

I currently work for The Green Estate in Sheffield and took on a new role there in October 2025 as Horticulture Production Operative growing a variety of Pictorial Meadow turf mixes. I wanted to increase my propagation knowledge and skills in order to better equip for this role. I was lucky enough to visit Great Dixter twice already in 2025, firstly invited to their annual Working Weekend in February and then secondly in September as part of a garden tour organised by a Green Estate team member, Owen Hayman. As such, and like so many before me, I had already fallen under Dixter's spell and so when the Propagation for Gardeners course dates aligned with the end of the tour, I jumped at the chance to book, with the Merlin Trust bursary funding the fee. Already brimming with the sights and sensations from three days of RHS Wisley, Beth Chatto's, Sissinghurst, and John Little's garden in Essex, I made my way back to Dixter on the morning of 29th September. Having been born and raised in Hastings but having lived away for almost 20 years, the country roads and gently rolling fields were both familiar and strange. What followed over the next three days was a stepping into a world and a life both rooted in the past but also firmly in the present. I thought there was no better way of describing the ineffable quality of the place and the joy of my experience than by poem.

Ode to Dixter

Betwixt terracotta tile and low slung gable
Great hall and fire, with corners sable
Hedgerow alive with song and bustling
From every corner comes life a-rustling
While rolling fields stretch beyond
A spark ignites a feeling fond
Entry into time immortal
Stepping through an unseen portal

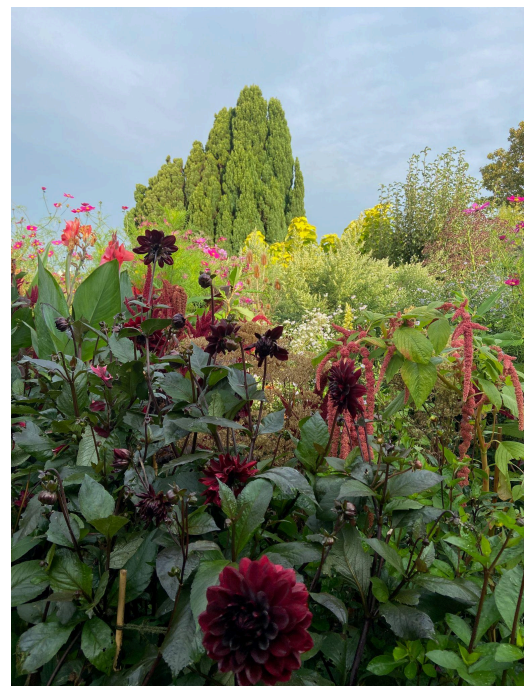
First light filters through misty haze
Gives verdant dew a milky glaze
Down narrow path the senses fill
Your own heartbeat seems to spill
And merge as one with this place
Enfolding in a hushed embrace
A sense of that which has returned
A stillness that the heart has yearned



Then corner turned
The sun spills in
Vision burned
Fast fade-in
To riotous colour, fancy frill
Dahlia, tagetes, salvia fill
Every inch, no room to spare
Though cosmos, canna also dare
Each one calls, each is heard
All sublime, and none absurd
Even amaranth, tendrils long
Adds it's notes to this song
And this is but one small part
Far from the end, just at the start



Monolithic arbors standing by
Casting benevolent watchful eye
Over us as we venture there
Led by those who take such care
Stewards of this dynamic land
Both at once contained and grand
To lead on where another once led
To keep his dream watered and fed
That drumming heart is still felt
Humming in borders where he knelt
The beat repeats, the notes may alter
But the joy within does not falter
With love and respect, this place exists
Whilst evolving, the spirit persists



But we could spend many hours there
All happy to roam this abundant terre
Instead we must meet our aim
And thus meet next to coldframe
For we are here to learn the art
Of propagation, an important part
For the Dixter team to magic produce
They must grow the plants, we deduce!



Michael shows how these are grown,
Where they're placed once seeds are sown,
With wire mesh and wooden box
The team try the mice to fox
Gravel keeps slugs and weeds at bay
As light pours through glass every day
Each cutting progresses down the line
Until label and price tag shows it's time

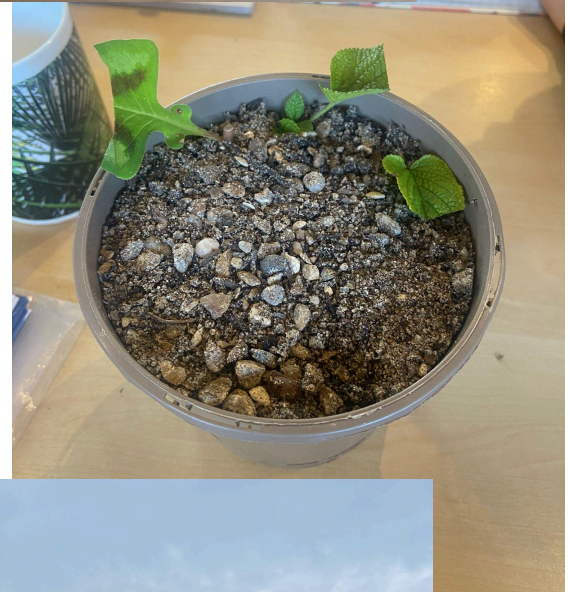
We look at soil, mulch and grit
The vintage way they harvest it
With pick axe, barrow, and a sheet
Beneath compost pile, a noble feat
We see how these components mix
And come together, so to fix
A potting compost that gives us hope
Our fledging offspring will yet still cope

Thus into the classroom we proceed
A booklet there with wisdom to heed
However, as it soon becomes clear
Though there are rules, there is no fear
With sharp snips and knife we set about
To propagate and dispel all doubt
That this sprig, few of node and leaf
Will rival those giants and not cause grief

And once they're placed in frame to settle
A thought occurs we've proved our mettle
With that the first day is done
We all concur it's been much fun
All of us different age and skill
Each parts that day with a thrill
Tomorrow will bring more to learn
Many Dixter secrets to discern

A bright Autumn morning dawns
Coffee and cake dispel the yawns
We stride into the garden then
To look for a useful specimen
Fergus leads us to paths unseen
The group becomes one with the green
Asters, geraniums loosed from ground
Insight imparted gathered round

Audible gasps as plants pulled asunder
Though with trained eye, no need to wonder
We marvel as one plant produces fifty
The plant provides the clues, fairly nifty
We hear the stories of a life shared
With those similarly ensnared
By all things leaf and cultivated
Such generosity never underrated



For this is the belief of this place
And those who act as it's human face
That the sharing of knowledge is so vital
To ensure it's continued survival
Take what you learn, pass it on
From then to now, never gone
Practice should not be overprotected
Fullness of heart not go undetected

We finish another day, full of pep
A new idea with each new step
The freedom to try and to fail
Licence to experiment, not to quail
From making mistakes, part of the game
Always learning, growing, never the same
Reluctantly we leave once more
Feeling we've just opened a door

The third day befalls, time passed so fast
Hard to believe it will be the last
Gathered in classroom a final time
We look at leaf cuttings set in line
Of Eucomis, tiny bulblets expressed
Begonia, cut, into soil firm pressed
Marvel at how life springs out
From tiny fragments, nature's clout

The final demonstration (slight despair)
Seed sowing, the mixture, and the care
Papaver seed, two to favour
This last task, one to savour
Dots of potential provided refuge
Watered with grace, not a deluge
Placed with others ready to leave
A new family with which to cleave

My head full of colour and of tone
Of scent and texture, forgotten my phone
My heart full of music and of sky
Of magic and mischief, sparks that fly
My soul full of green shade and vivid peak
Like a cat prowling, still more to seek
I leave this place with connection strong
Taking with me Dixter's song

