

A photograph of a garden at sunset. In the foreground, there are numerous orange and yellow flowers, possibly marigolds, interspersed with green foliage and some purple flowers on the right. In the background, a large, dark building with several chimneys is visible, partially obscured by tall, dark hedges. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and grey, indicating the time is either sunrise or sunset.

# Great Dixter & The Merlin Trust

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As I neared the end of my WRAGs placement year at a large, privately owned historical Estate, I began looking for ways to supplement my knowledge in areas I was most interested in and where I saw myself wanting to continue working after my placement finished.

The Estate gardens had been designed by Tom Stuart-Smith and his studio and I had been introduced to a wealth of beautiful and unusual plants because of this. But I was fascinated as to how his choices were informed, how those plants were chosen and put together to create constant interest and succession and how to successfully manage these transitions through the seasons.

For 18 years I had held a flame for the gardens at Great Dixter, managed by Fergus Garrett and his team. How many times had I thought (whilst stuck working in an office!) would I love to be a gardener there. So when the offer of a bursary came up on the WFGA website and after being awarded £100, it was the push I needed to just 'go for it'! I took 2 days holiday, plus the bursary, to justify my 3 day course at Great Dixter and it was the best money I've ever spent.

At the end of October 2025, I booked onto The Long Season Border – A Practical Guide to Succession. The course was taught by Fergus – who was absolutely brilliant – and the days were spent alternating by the hour from garden to classroom and back out again, from morning until sunset. To actually see the plants growing that we were studying in the classroom, work with them, move pots around, walk in and out and behind borders and listen to Fergus spouting vast fountains of knowledge was invaluable. I am definitely a 'hands on' learner, and I felt this course gave me almost as much as my year at college studying Garden Design. Also a far better use at this point in my career than the online RHS course I had toyed with and originally applied for the bursary for.

In brief, we covered:

- How to choose hard working, long season herbaceous, woody plants and grasses for permanent structure
- Winter interest and use of bulbs
- Prolonging seasons through self-sowers, annuals, bedding, seed sowing
- Physically laying out a border, looking at spaces within the border and moving yourself through it





On return from this course, I began my first ever ‘real client’ gardening project (coincidentally), where I cleared, cut back and redesigned the planting. What a difference this course made! I was able to introduce successional planting and used bulbs in a much more informed way.

Having now completed my WRAGs placement and not sure initially in what direction to look for work, I have now ended up with another project like this. I really love being able to create and design as well as garden and help the garden owner get the most out of their garden, from struggling to satisfied!

I continue to volunteer weekly at the Plant Library for Tom Stuart-Smith and Millie Souter, but can see myself becoming the Self-Employed Gardening Bird I have always longed to be!

