Thanks to funding from the PG Trust, I was able to stay in an Airbnb, travel down to East Sussex and work for a week at Great Dixter Gardens, or as long associate, academic and friend of Christopher Lloyd's, Kamal described it, 'God's Golden Acre'.

The funding enabled me to go as it paid for the majority of the accommodation and petrol costs which without I would have been unable to go, so I am really very grateful indeed.

Figure 1 Me doing the morning sweep - a daily ritual at Dixter

Everything below was a learning curve for me. Everything I did was different to the way I have learn before, or additional detail was required, to ensure uniform and high standard working. It was a pleasure to work in this way, and I came away feeling that I learnt an awful lot and am really grateful to the PG Trust as it was everything I had hope for.

Day 1

I was lucky to start my week in the Nursery which is not common practice but enabled me to gain a good insight into the management and general day to day running of a nursery. I worked on the following tasks:

- Restocking cold frames with new stock – Papaver species
- Created Dixter compost

- This process was so great to do. Dixter make their own compost which Fergus admitted was costlier, but the benefits to the plants outweighed this expense. For example, introducing the plants to 'soil' i.e. loam from the garden allowed the plants to settle in easily and with fewer complications e.g. pests when bedded out in the garden. It also means that the plants have become accustomed to the 'hard' conditions that the great outside offers.
- They categorise in a similar fashion to the John Innes compost brand, and we made their version of the number two potting mix, which had 2 full* barrows of sterilised** loam, 3 sacks of melcourt sylvafibre, 2 full barrows of crushed horticultural grit and 2 full barrows of composted bark. There was also nutrients added such as 200g of lime, 2.8 kg of base fertiliser, in this case, fish, blood and bone; 2kg of Osmocote.
- The process involved mixing all of these together by collecting them in a pile, and then with a shovel, moving the pile twice in order to fully mix, applying water to increase the overall water held by the potting mix.
- They use a loam based compost because:

- Loam is a natural source of nutrients and trace elements necessary for plant growth
- It mimics natural garden soil
- It drains well, whilst also retaining moisture
- It is easy to re-wet once dry
- Pots have greater ballast

- Potted on Helenium plants

- I used the number two compost that we had made up earlier in the day
- The technique that the Nursery manager showed me included:

- Filling the pot with a small amount of compost
- Testing the plant root ball to see how deep it needs to go
- Filling the around the plant with compost
- Inserting four fingers around the root ball to firm in the plant

- Top dressing with loose number two compost
- It is also vital to make sure the leaves do not get compost on them as this may increase the chances of infection getting in
- It is also essential to make sure that the plant is in the middle of the pot, as these particular plants were going to go for sale in the nursery and so, aesthetics were important.

Figure 2 A range of plants that I potted on

- <u>Divided and split some grasses (species unknown, even FG doesn't know</u>)

- This was the first time that I had done 'splitting' in this way.
- The technique involved splitting the plants with secateurs down an old flowering stem, reducing the root ball by removing the bottom third and cutting the split stem to the base of the plant, as well as reducing the leaf surface area by 50% and completely removing last year's flowering stems (with tassel)
- The potting up process was then the same as described for Helenium's above.

- <u>Cuttings</u>

- As well as potting on the Helenium plants, I also took cuttings from some of the healthier plants which I then potted up in cuttings compost in the following way:

- The cuttings compost was made of: 1-part loam, 2 parts organic matter (peat substitute), 3 parts grit and importantly no fertiliser. Also in each pot, an inch of grit is put in the bottom to enable sharper drainage.
- Cuttings were kept in water to reduce the water lost from them post cutting, and to prevent desiccation.
- Nodal cuttings were taken, lower leaves removed and the top leaves were reduced by 50% so as to reduce the loss of water via transpiration, but also to focus the plant more on producing roots
- After the grit had been added to each pot, the cuttings mix was then applied
- A dibber, the same size as the cutting stem is used to create an entry hole for each cutting at the edge of the pot first, as root cuttings prefer to be close to the exterior of the pot, and indeed root more easily, probably because there is less chance of water sitting and rotting the roots, and indeed there is probably greater access to oxygen for root respiration
- It was important to not gouge a hole and rather just 'stick' the dibber down once, so as to reduce compaction of the potting media
- I then pushed the individual cuttings in a hole and filled the whole pot, including the middle section
- I then watered until water came out of the bottom of the pot, at which point watering ceases, so as not to over water.

Day 2

- <u>Worked in the blue Garden</u>

- **Weeding – lots of Bryony**

- As in all gardens, pernicious weeds are kept for a burn pile to prevent weed seeds polluting the compost

- **Staking**

- Dixter stake using an old fashioned method which perhaps has been lost by lots of gardens today – we certainly don't stake like this at Wrest Park, but I am determined to train my team as it really is a very good way of staking plants such as Euphorbia spp. or Thalictrum spp. which tend in the wind or rain to 'flop' over, ruining the aesthetic appeal of the plant and indeed the border in which they occupy.
- The general idea is that a clump of e.g. Euphorbia is staked in such a way that visually the string and the stake are not visible along the viewing lines
- Stakes are put behind the plant from the main viewing points, and one stake is used per designated clump, that will perhaps in a drift of clumps have several clumps in close proximity. One stake is used per clump, and they are interconnected with string in the following way:

- Flowering stems are selected on the exterior which are to make up the general 'shape' of each clump

- The stake is driven into the ground, and with small sections of string (rather than one long piece which can become cumbersome within a deep and densely planted border), a clove hitch knot is tied below a knot on the cane so as to prevent the string blowing off in the wind
- Then the string is navigated to the first exterior flowering stem at which point the string goes around it and back towards the next flowering stem. Key here is that the tension is right – not so loose so as not to provide support on a potentially windy day, and not too tight so as to give an un-natural and restrained aesthetic.
- This completes one ring, so to speak. You then do this with different clumps within the same drift, interconnecting the rings, much like the Olympic rings. This when complete allows a free structure to be retained, whilst also promoting stability.
- With different plants, different tying locations are required. For example, *Thalictrum Elin* is quite top heavy and weaknesses can occur lower down the stems Therefore ties are made lower down the flowering stems so as to provide increased support in an area of potential weakness

- **Tying clematis**

- I tied a clematis to a nearby tree so that the blooms will cascade along the branch which will make an excellent spectacle for guests

- **Learning more to work in the 'Dixter way'**

- Being careful with feet
- Minimising journeys into the beds – being careful, minimising compaction and damage to self sowers which are obviously a huge part of the horticultural aesthetic at Dixter, going out the same way you went in, and 'tickling' the soil with a Sneeboer long handled fork to break up foot prints and compacted soil
- There is less of a requirement at Dixter to remove all the weeds and edge really straight lines. There is more emphasis on subtle enhancement of the naturalistic appreciation of a space and the plants within it.
- It is a balancing act between weeding out the Vetch and Bryony whilst perhaps leaving in less persistent or pernicious weeds
- Planted *out Epimedium Wuchense*, a shade loving plant in an odd little corner in the Blue Border. Although it didn't look much as the plant was quite juvenile, the hope is that when fully grown, it will provide an interesting plant in a space that was otherwise un-used along the pathway.

Day 3

High Garden

- *Aster Latifolious horizontalis*

- The Aster's, which will eventually this summer form a dense blanket of two parallel line – in fact forming a kind of dual hedge through the High Garden

- A lot was growing around them an even through them including many weeds, Narcissus, Comfrey leaves, Verbascum leaves and several Allium, as well as Euphorbia and lemon balm
- The aim was to reduce immediate competition for light, nutrients and space, as well as probably reducing pests and disease by decreasing the humidity around each plant

- <u>Mulched with mushroom compost and Fish, Blood and Bone</u>

- Benefits include the fact that it has been sterilised and therefore weed and pest and disease free

- <u>Potting displays</u>

- It was interesting to hear from Fergus about their pot displays which make up quite a large proportion of their total 'display' at Dixter.
- They often use the displays as a chance to test out new plants or plants which they have not used before. For example, a purple Tulip, which. Whilst incredible and stunning in it's florescence and vividness, tended to droop and therefore was potentially not a good Tulip to use in a bedding display, although obviously it could be staked – but this increases the man hours required to grow and display it, and therefore adds to the overall complexity of this particular growing season – all good lessons to learn along a horticultural journey

Day 4

- <u>Potting on</u>

Figure 3 Me potting on

- We did a lot of potting on today including:

- Lychnis ‘Vesuvius’
- Fergus pointed out that for smaller, more delicate plants or those that were more ‘floppy’, they should be planted deeper so to provide more support, which in turn removes the weak point of the plant, and will increase its ability to grow strong. It was great to get practical feedback which helped my technique moving forward. It was exactly this kind of positive criticism that I wanted from my time here, as it helps to improve one’s technique and enables the perfect replication of the desired potting technique
- For example, Fergus also showed us all the importance of having uniform replication of potting on. The amount of soil that everyone put each pot greatly influences the growing potential of the plant. For example, if you put too much soil, there is less room for water and indeed soil may be lost. If you put too little, when it is watered in

too much of a gap is produced at the top and then compared to other pots, uneven watering takes place and therefore each plant receives unequal amounts of water, and therefore each plant is exposed to different growing conditions, which affects the uniformity of the crop.

- When creating plants for sale or for a border, uniformity is essential to ensure that the display looks as good as it can or that the product is as strong as it can be for commercial reasons.
- Fergus also showed us the importance of uniform watering using a watering can. This included, as I have previously learnt to start the flow on the ground so as to ensure uniform dispersal of water, and then ensuring that each pot as a really good soak, followed by second watering immediately after to completely soak the medium and allow the plant the chance of having a good start in its new pot.

- <u>Meeting about border choices and design</u>

I have run and been involved in hundreds of meetings in my life and this has to be the best one of the lot. We all, as a team met in the education room, with a new seed catalogue to not only order Fergus' choices for spring seed sowing, but also to pick extra seeds for cut flowers as well as everyone being allowed a 'wild card'. The meeting was incredibly inspiring and motivational. Fergus drew design plans for the a border outside the front of the house, whilst everyone pitched in ideas to support and compliment his initial design.

It really was a moment of clarity in terms of me visualising my desire to work at Dixter after I have finished the HBGTP programme.

Fergus went on to describe the basic structural requirements of successional bedding and this is an area which I really want to learn more about – creating border displays which go from one Spring bulb display, into a summer display and so on throughout the year, so as there is a continuity and linkage between them all, but also importantly, there is no period where the soil is bare or looks like it is waiting for the next display, which often is the case in a lot of gardens. It is a skill that comes from years of practice and planning and one which I am incredibly keen to learn after my time at Wrest Park ends.

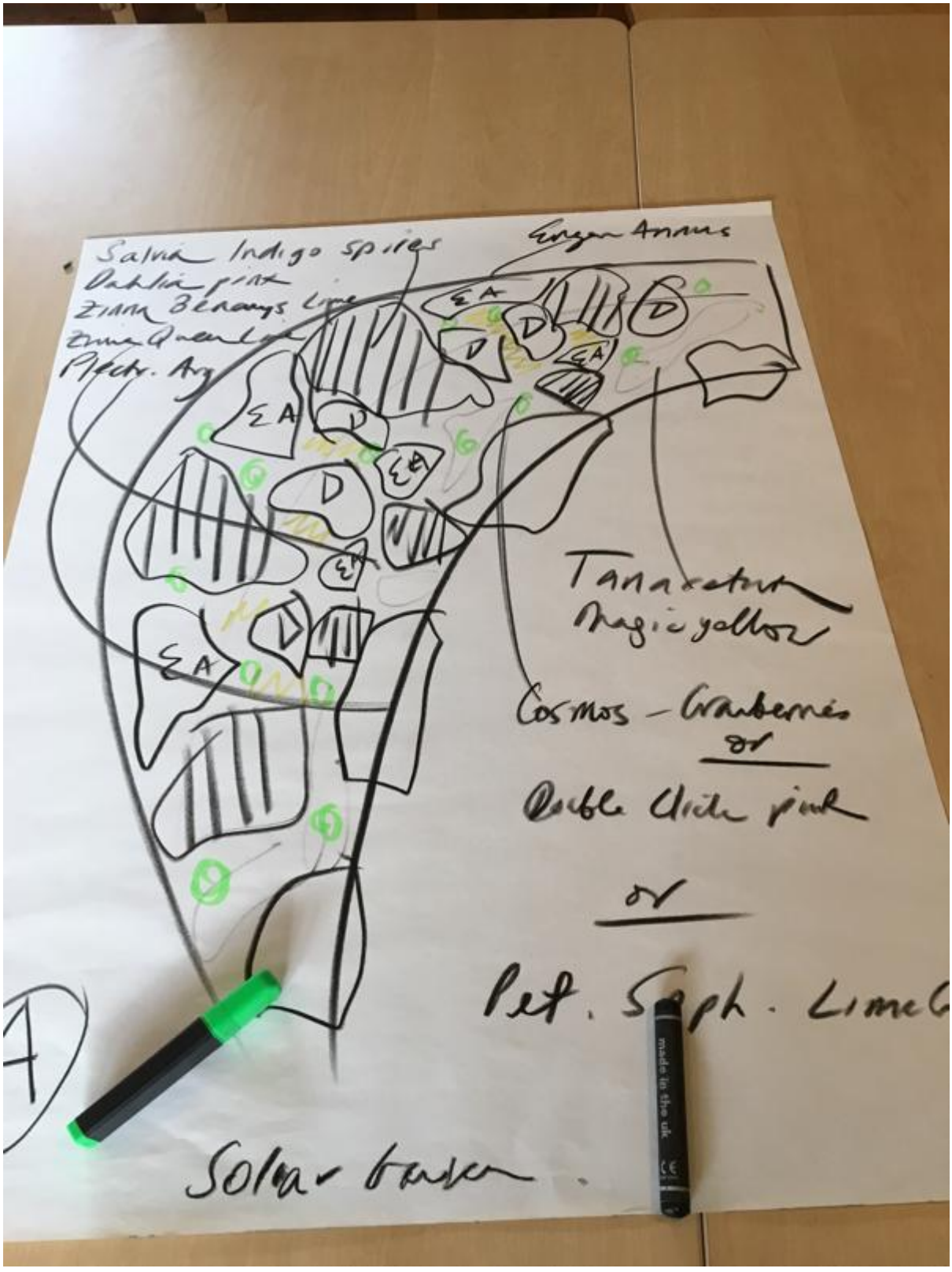

Figure 4 One of Fergus' border designs

- Using seed catalogue

- Amaranthus ‘Hot Biscuit’ with white cosmos was a stunning combination suggested by Fergus and is one I would love to use in the bedding design at Wrest Park next year
- Tagetes straight patula which grows very bright orange and tall, as does Simba
- Papaver Danish Flag was incredible
- My choice was Rudbeckia ‘Green Wizard’ which was quite a strange choice but the inflorescence lacked the usual coloured petals and was interesting for this reason
- Helianthus ‘Super Ted’ was an incredible sunflower that Fergus chose which I have never seen, and am going to buy quickly now to plant and test as it was so stunning in its unusual and ragged appearance, much like the tufted ‘fur’ of Super Ted, hence the name!

Day 5

<u>Potting on</u>

- We continued potting on
- Species included *Helipterum* ‘Tetra Red’ and *Dianthus* ‘Amazon Neon Cherry’
- As so many of us were potting on, we created a bench form MDF boards and straw hay bales
- All the students have weekly indents which I asked to be involved in and it was a revelation. Unlike most that I have had which last for no more than ten minutes and lack any real detail or information, this one was for 20 species and lasted nearly two hours. The detail was incredible and included information like growth habit, planting combo’s, hardiness rating and specific information relating to that individual plant and its history in relation to Fergus and Christopher Lloyd. Again, it was wildly inspiring and gave me increased drive to study more at Great Dixter.