



**My second week at Great Dixter
by David Bull
August 2017**

I spent another wonderful week at Great Dixter in August 2017 courtesy of the PG Trust. It was another fun filled and exciting week, in which I did the following:

Meadow cutting

- Meadow cutting is done annually at Dixter, as it is in most places to enable the seeds of desired flower species to grow throughout the growing season
- Yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) has been introduced over the last few years which parasitises grass species, weakening it and allowing other, usually non-dominant species to flourish
- The Dixter meadows have an abundant orchids including Early Purple's, Common Spotted and Pyramidal Orchids
- The meadows are cut with a Trackmaster (essentially a horizontal hedge cutter on wheels) – I was trained to use it and to clean and maintain it – which I then also trained other staff on which was very useful for my learning
- The hay is then raked into piles before being put into a pile near the Veg patch
- The way in which the hay mounds work are very simple in terms of structure, but can go wrong if not done correctly
- The concept is to layer hay from one side to the other, ensuring layers overlap the last and that hay is put into the edges so that the sides build up straight, rather than in a pyramidal fashion – this is harder than it sounds and was good to have several attempts at it, as it became easier the more I did it
- I also saw an abundance of wild life including my first slow worm, several field mice, frogs and toads



Figure 1 Meadow after cutting



Figure 2 Hay compost pile



Figure 3 Me laying the hay on the compost pile with pitch fork

High Garden staking

- I helped with staking Dahlias and *Tagetes cinnabar* which was great practice as we don't do anything like this at Wrest Park and I really enjoy doing it, and it is a skill that requires practice to perfect
- The concept lies in the idea that tall, often leggy plants such as *Thalictrum* spp. Or Euphorbia to give two other examples, can blow over in the wind
- Tying in domestic gardens can be simply a tie-around job which makes the plant look like it's had its belt done up too tightly!
- The technique used at Dixter involves hiding a stake behind a plant, out of view and tying a half hitch knot below a knot in the cane to prevent it flying off in the wind
- Then, without touching the stems wrapping the string around outside, sturdier stems, around the stem once and then over the top of the string to create a stopping point and then on to the next stem
- You don't need to do every stem, but it's important to create a circular pattern stemming from each cane

- If a patch of the desired plant is large, then you can overlap these string 'rings' much like the Olympic rings
- The tautness of the string is vital – it must be looser than you would think as this allows the plant to ebb and flow with the wind and maintain its naturally wofty appearance, without falling over – it is this that requires skill and takes time to master
- The very full borders at Dixter also give this task added complexity as you have to weave yourself around plants and often become a lot like a ballerina!



Figure 4 View from the High Garden to the house



Figure 5 Dahlias being staked

Mowing

- I did a day of mowing the meadow areas once the hay had been cut
- They cut the turf right down so that it looks almost scalped in appearance
- This is to allow the seeds of Orchids and meadow species to take in the soil and not to be outcompeted by the various grass species in the meadows
- I used a Kabota mower, similar to one I use at Wrest Park

Nursery work

- I did quite a bit of pricking out
- Examples of plants include various *Nicotiana* spp.
- They were tiny seedlings, with only their cotyledons showing, no more than 4 mm in height from cotyledon tip to root tip!
- I used a Dixter Yew dibber to remove them from the pots, after I had turned the pot on its side and gently eased out a part of the soil with seedlings in it
- The job required a great deal of patience and a steady hand – often controlling breathing was necessary to limit the disturbance to the minute seedlings.
- It was very rewarding and pleasing once complete
- I also helped sow Orchid seeds, which although it was a total experiment in terms of their germination (viability) it was interesting to learn the process anyway

- The seeds were mixed with sand due to them being so small and were scattered on firmed down compost and topped with a thin layer of horticultural grit
- I also watered several areas

A huge thanks to the trustees and everyone involved, especially Helen for sorting everything out – I had a super week (probably my favourite in horticulture to date), so thanks very much for the opportunity.

Kind Regards

Dave Bull