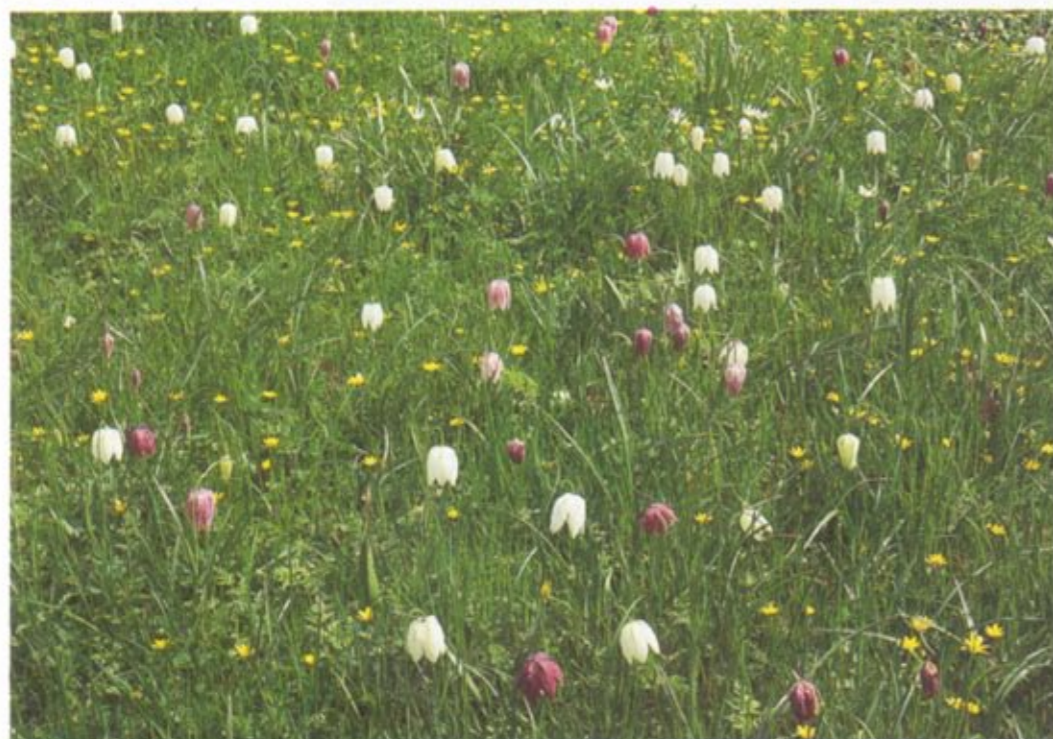


GREAT DIXTER ROUND THE YEAR

by CHRISTOPHER LLOYD



(Top left) The daffodil orchard in spring. (Top right) An aubretia wall and (above left) *Fritillaria meleagris* in the meadow, in April. (Above right) Lilac Souvenir de Louis Spaeth, variegated honesty, the foliage of *Ballota acetabulosa* and self-sown forget-me-nots in May

IT is 25 years ago this spring that I started writing about my garden for COUNTRY LIFE. That is nearly one-third of the garden's total life, for although Dixter itself was built around 1460, the garden was created only between 1910, when my parents bought the property, and 1912. A few furnishings, including two orchards, existed before and survived those dates, but little in the way of plants. The most important features were a number of farmbuildings, and these Edwin Lutyens,

when he designed the garden for us, as also he restored and added to the house, was careful to preserve and work into the picture so as to be a necessary part of it.

In early photographs, the garden with its walls and terraces appears wonderfully built but also stark. Time and plants (and subsidence) have softened that, but the yew hedges and topiary, of which my father was so fond, play their part in maintaining a firm structure. My father died in 1933, and when the garden became my province, I

was not too particular about precision clipping.

These yews started life as seedlings, each with its own character and growing at a different speed, so that there are bulges and undulations in the hedges that were never intended. But I rather like them. Yews are plants, after all, even if used like masonry, and they show their personality in this way. In the grey of winter their castellated outlines may look a little severe, whereas in early summer the varying

Christopher Lloyd has been writing in COUNTRY LIFE about his famous garden at Great Dixter, Sussex, for a quarter of a century. Its flowering season has no beginning or end, but continues through the months. If his gardening season were not never-ending, he would give up in disgust.



Pink pomponette daisies with quilled petals and lily-flowered China Pink tulips in April on the north-west side of an old cowhouse, called a hovel in Sussex. The ivy, Goldheart, needs constant vigilance to prevent its removing the peg-tile roof



(Top left) Russell lupins in the High Garden and (top right) *Allium christophii*, *Hydrangea serrata* Preziosa and *Cotinus coggygia* Foliis Purpureis in June. (Above left) *Filipendula rubra* Venusta in July. (Above right) *Limnanthes douglasii* and blue Dutch iris in June

shades of green and bronze on the young shoots are almost frivolous. But at all times, their presence is strong and makes a reassuring background to the mixed borders which are our mainstay, and which are always changing both with the seasons and from year to year.

I don't think I am a restless gardener, but I do like change within the framework. If an old friend dies, the tragedy is momentary. In gardening you look ahead, rarely (unless invention flags) behind.

Whatever vagaries a particular year or season may have, recurrence is the constant. "When does your gardening year start?" I am sometimes asked. There is no end and no beginning to a circle, but a great deal of overlap in plant activity. Leaves fall and plants die down in October, but some features, like my michaelmas-daisy hedges, reach their peak then. They used to be double lavender hedges, linking a community of topiary birds, but lavender hates our heavy soil.

I changed over to *Aster lateriflorus* Horizontalis 10 or 12 years ago. It had

always been in the garden but this possible use for it occurred to me because of its strong, bushy, almost shrublike habit, which it retains even as a winter skeleton. In front of it is a ribbon of the neat little knotweed, *Polygonum vacciniifolium*, whose mauve-pink pokers are also at their peak in autumn, and in tune with the aster's own colouring.

Meanwhile, in other parts of the garden, the bright pink *Nerine x bowdenii* and the cadmium yellow *Sternbergia lutea*, as also *Crocus speciosus* and *C. nudiflorus* are at their best, and start a new growing year by flowering in autumn, not in spring as we expect of most bulbs. There is new foliage on *Arum creticum* and *A. pictum* now, too, and on *Cyclamen hederifolium*, and the huge lacework shawl of giant fennel, *Ferula communis*, begins to expand and unfold. Autumn is a beginning for those plants after their summer rest. And it is a new start for the gardener with his changeover from summer to spring bedding and, indeed, with the planting of bulbs in many places, including meadow areas, which are almost

as important at Dixter as the borders themselves.

This alternation of the organised and the near-wild seems to me particularly successful. It is nowhere so marked as where the Long Border, straight and highly concentrated (but still, I hope, relaxed) is divided from meadow, simply by a flagstone path and a strip of mown grass.

Although I bed into them such spring and summer features, like foxgloves, mulleins and tulip bulbs, as I shall be needing next spring and early summer, the borders retain through the winter months nearly all their old and withered stems from the past growing season. They look a bit dishevelled, and yet I like them, especially the grasses, the cardoon skeletons and the sedums. And there are evergreen shrubs. There is never a feeling of emptiness, as in the old herbaceous.

Apart from short days and a general lack of sunshine, some winters are a cipher. Primroses and polyanthus flower throughout; winter crocuses take over from autumn crocuses, and spring crocuses from



Helichrysum petiolare Limelight and *Tagetes Cinnabar* in September. The *helichrysum* likes cool conditions and scorches in hot weather. This planting replaced the tulips and pomponettes (see page 85)

winter. The air is scented with *Mahonia japonica*, witch hazel, sarcococcas and winter sweet but also from aromatic shrubs like *Hebe cyprioides* and its dwarf form Boughton Dome, *Cistus x cyprus* and *Ozothamnus ledifolius*, smelling of stewed prunes.

In other winters we are blanketed by snow or, far worse, blasted by icy frost winds without snow. There has been a general tendency of recent years for mild autumn weather to be prolonged into December and for winter to be prolonged into March and even April. Snow at Easter is commonplace.

But plants cannot be held back indefinitely. Hellebores are among the first on the move. From appearing to be in a state of total collapse during hard frost, the pale green inflorescences of our native *Helleborus foetidus*, unkindly and unjustly called stinking, revive as by the touch of a magic wand when temperatures rise a little. It tucks itself into the stemmy bottoms of rose bushes, into paving cracks, even into drystone walling, and is surely among the handsomest of evergreens.

Although I admit to the lure of a rare plant, on the whole I am not a plant snob. Shown a particularly black-flowered form of hellebore, I can admire it at close range and in a strong light, but as a garden ingredient it seems to me a non-event, and that, in a garden, is how a hellebore must be judged.

Of snowdrops I cannot have enough, and crocuses are, if possible, even more endearing. It is a great excitement, an event indeed, when a mild day in late February or March opens hosts of them wide, both in sun and in shade, and the bees are all over them. The meadows at Dixter start their year with these flowers and continue with dog's-tooth violets, *Erythronium dens-canis*, in March; as also Lent lilies *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, wood anemones, lady's smock, goldilocks and celandines. And then, in April, besides the grand display of daffodils and narcissus, planted in the orchard before the First World War, there are the snakeshead fritillaries, *Fritillaria meleagris*. They revel in heavy, wet meadow soils. My mother started them, and was always raising new

batches from seed. Once established, they do their own thing, which in garden terms is called naturalising.

Aubrietias naturalise the dry walls, particularly on either side of our back drive and again, on the lower terrace overlooking the piece of drained moat. They are followed, from May onwards, by the little Mexican daisy which we have long known as *Erigeron mucronatus* but are now told to call *E. karvinskianus*: hideous change. It opens white, ages pink and lasts in flower for six months.

There are early incidents in the borders, although I do not plant any of them specifically for spring. *Bergenia schmidtii* is coming into bloom as I write in mid January. *B. stracheyi* and its white form, *alba*, will follow, and then the powerful rosy magenta Ballawley hybrid and soft pink *B. ciliata* var. *ciliata* in April. This last is my favourite because of its foliage. It is a deciduous species, and the leaves take time to develop, but are large, soft and furry, a revelation on dewy mornings.

Self-sowing forget-me-nots play a part

in many of the borders. I either weed out or move those that have placed themselves awkwardly. Last year there was a pretty effect with them and variegated honesty, which also self-sows beneath a huge old Souvenir de Louis Spaeth lilac, one of whose branches had condescended to come down to their level and flower among them. Most of that bush was destroyed in the Great Storm, but within a few years you will never suspect it. Lilacs are great regenerators.

Only a couple of yards further along this border, which is in the Barn Garden (try not to look at the barn roof—another storm victim), forget-me-nots have again happily combined, this time with *Viola cornuta* and the single orange *Geum x borisii*. The white daisy bush, *Olearia x scillonensis*, makes a voluptuous background, if only the previous winter spares it. It grows quickly, and so needs but one mild winter to set it on its feet again. I always take replacement cuttings in case of accidents and I plant a triangle of three, to make a bold impression.

I enjoy the scope that bedding out gives me to try different combinations with annuals, biennials, perennials treated as biennials and bulbs. Sometimes the bedding plants take their place in a mixed border; at others in beds devoted principally to them. I don't like the "open jam tart" kind of bedding that my mother deplored with that phrase.

There are two beds along the north-west side of an old cow house, called a hovel in Sussex, in which, last spring, I had a display of double pink pomponette daisies (neat, not gross, and with quilled petals). Behind, with a few straying forwards into them, was the lily-flowered tulip called China Pink.

I was away in June, so this didn't get replanted with its summer contribution till early July, but that caught up in the end and consisted of the bronze, single marigold, Cinnabar and the tender bedding perennial *Helichrysum petiolare* Limelight. The marigold is not too squat, and varies in height a little (I have saved seeds from the tallest plant), while the helichrysum can be spaced at wide intervals because of its questing, interweaving habit. It likes the cool conditions I gave it, but scorches in hot sunlight and dry soil. For next summer we have already planted the stately *Verbascum olympicum* which, at 8ft, will make a very different impression.

I usually have two beds in the High Garden, either side of the path, of lupins, grown from seed as biennials. They are preceded by tulips, interplanted, and sometimes followed by the delightful annual *Malope trifida*, which is a mallow,



Arundo donax, *Hydrangea x macrophylla* Nigra, *Begonia Nonstop* and *Symphitum x uplandicum* Variegatum in August. (Below) By the porch: *Lilium formosanum*, begonias Flamboyant and Sutherlandii in September



but with green, translucent slits at the base of its petals, which shine with backlighting like stained glass.

Instead of lupins I have the albino *Viola cornuta* Alba coming on for this spring with tulips. The lupins—a dwarf strain called Minarette (for the site is exposed—will feature this time in the main bed in front of the house. This is backed by masses of white Japanese anemones, flowering from early August, so that the follow-on bedding (*Phlox drummondii* Beauty Mixed, last year) always has a comfortable background into which it can merge if it pleases.

Among reliably self-sowing annuals, I have four favourites. *Atriplex hortensis*, called orach, is a kind of spinach, handsome in its 6ft tall red- and purple-leaved strains. That intermingles with perennials in the mixed borders. Most have to be weeded out as tiny seedlings, for it is prolific. Love-in-a-mist, *Nigella damascena*, repeats itself in an excellently blue strain, so I have never adulterated it with the Persian Jewels mixture. *Calceolaria mexicana*, 2ft tall, has acid-lemon pouches and I like it with the blue summer-flowering *Myosotis scorpioides* Mermaid. *Limnanthes douglasii* self-sows on a corner, sometimes fitting in two crops a year. The first's May-June flowering coincides with a blue Dutch iris that we have had for ever. They are such good-tempered bulbs. A patch of the yellow kind rising above catmint also looks good in early summer.

No picture here shows the Long Border, which is 70yd long in its main section and 15ft deep, in its full summer glory. Perhaps those shots have been overdone elsewhere, but I have to record that the tree-like Mount Etna broom, *Genista aetnensis*, whose fountain of yellow has featured in so many photographs, is no more. It was gradually dying all of last year. At 37 years old, that was remarkably good going for a broom. I shall replace it with one of its own seedlings, as I cannot think of anything I should prefer, even with this god-sent opportunity for change. Perhaps it won't like to grow in the same place a second time. In that case I shall have to think. The tree-like, white *Hydrangea heteromalla* might be an idea.

A still point midway along the border is here represented by a detail of *Allium christophii*, already run to seed but none the worse for it, *Hydrangea serrata* Preziosa, just coming on, and the greeny purple foliage of *Cotinus coggygria* Folius Purpureis, which is one of the most effective smoke bushes. The allium is an enthusiastic self-sower. Behind these I have a *Rosa moyesii* (raised from RHS seed in the 1930s), whose hips ripen in August,



the silver-foliaged willow *Salix alba* Argentea, pollarded, and Dickson's Golden elm, which we have to clip over every other year so as to prevent its becoming a tree beyond our control.

By now the orchard opposite the Long Border is like a hayfield, but still beautiful in my eyes, with a pink haze of common bent (*Agrostis tenuis*) in flower, heavily silvered by dew in the mornings. Some people are shocked by its tousled aspect. It would certainly help if they didn't tread the grass down.

In a large garden you can afford to grow a few plants which flower only briefly and are non-co-operating passengers or absentees for the other 50 weeks. During their short innings they are staggeringly impressive. Among them I would place *Rhododendron* Tessa, *Lychnis chalcidonica* (violently scarlet), *Campanula latifolia*, *Centaurea macrocephala* (a big yellow cornflower) and the pink candyfloss *Filipendula rubra* Venusta, which is a kind of meadowsweet and flowers in July. I moved it all, as I thought, to the horse-pond area, and it copes happily there with rough, boggy conditions, but a piece got left behind. It increased and now I haven't the heart to turn it out again, although it makes a nuisance of itself by needing to be discreetly staked.

Through the archway, hydrangeas can be seen in the background, and an old-fashioned stalwart called Nigra (with black stems) features prominently in a grouping with the giant reed grass, *Arundo donax*, the variegated comfrey, *Symphitum x uplandicum* Variegatum, and some salmon pink Nonstop begonias. I shall say more of this hydrangea in the Spring Gardens Number

Aster lateriflorus Horizontalis hedges at Great Dixter in October. (Below) *Colchicum speciosum* Album, and *Helichrysum petiolare* Variegatum in September



on April 7. Its pink colouring is quite a different shade from that of the begonia, and I was as surprised as pleased that they went so well together, given the emollient influence of neighbouring foliage plants. This juxtaposition of contrasting elements—grass, shrub, hardy perennial and tender bedding plant—epitomises the style of gardening that I stand for.

Miniaturism is scarcely in tune with a garden this size, so when I bought a large old stone sink last spring, I did not plant it up with saxifrages, sempervivums, raoulias and a mini-conifer (to create the obligatory vertical accent, don't you know). In a garden almost daily open to the public I should anyway have quickly lost such contents. Instead, I filled it with a mauve *Verbena*, *V. bipinnatifida*, and, by way of relief, one plant of *Diascia* Ruby Field. The diascia gave up flowering before the end of the season, but the verbena (I gave it

regular feeds) went from strength to strength. As I write, the diascia looks extremely strong again, and I'm wondering if the verbena will survive.

This kind of temporary planting is what I also practise in large ornamental pots elsewhere, while outside our front porch I maintain a shuttle service of pots from the back-up frameyard area, when they are looking their best, returning or discarding them when they have made their bow. That goes on from April to October. It is a welcoming feature as you approach the house.

I have said little of the Sunk Garden, which has the Barn Garden around it, but this area, enclosed by walls, barns and hedging, is specially satisfying for giving you both near and distant views wherever you may be standing. Thus the yellow *Kniphofia* Torchbearer, flowering in September, accents the three-dimensional prospect. I should like its spires to be echoed in the distance, either by more of the same or by some other spire-maker, such as the dwarf pampas grass. That's something to work on. One of the worst things visitors can say to me, if they don't want a grumpy reply, is "It's never-ending, isn't it?" (while I'm on my knees weeding). If it were anything else, I should give up.

Meanwhile, the year completes and renews its cycle. *Colchicums*, called Naked Boys, are given a temporary setting while they flower in the borders, with a tender bedding plant, *Helichrysum petiolare* Variegatum. But they are telling us of another spring approaching. Yes, it is never-ending, but we gardeners are necessary and willing cogs in the wheel.

Photographs: Alex Starkey.