

2016-2017 RHS Interchange Fellowship

Molly Hendry | Final Report

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9.3 - 9.25	RHS Wisley, Surrey
9.26 - 11.7	Sheffield University, Sheffield
11.8 - 12.22	Eden Project, Cornwall
1.6 - 4.3	Great Dixter, Rye
4.4 - 5.17	Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh
5.18 - 5.28	Chelsea Flower Show, London
5.29 - 6.2	Winfield House, London
6.3 - 6.16	Royal Botanic Garden Kew, London
6.17 - 7.7	Tresco Abbey, Isles of Scilly

Introduction

At the beginning of September I left the hot and humid state of Alabama and headed straight into the beginning of a crisp autumn in the UK. My interests lie at the intersection of horticulture and landscape architecture, where a love of plants can drive the choreography of designed places to bring people into a deeper relationship with the world around them. My goal during these 10 months in Britain is to explore how the natural world can be designed to create experiences which captivate the hearts and imaginations of people. I also want to immerse myself in the rich gardening heritage of Britain, while seeing the varied natural and cultural landscape throughout Britain and Europe. My aspiration as a landscape architect is to first and foremost to be a gardener, who understands the rhythms of the natural world over time and how people can step into those rhythms in a meaningful way. Each one of my placements was incredibly unique in its focus and has challenged me to explore my place within the field of horticulture and design. This report will be a hybrid between my horticultural interest and design thinking. What is most valuable for me is learning how the vision of each placement pushes the boundaries of the connection between people and plants, and I am so grateful to be able to learn from some of the world's most exciting minds!



Day of arrival in the UK



Views of London as we landed

RHS Wisley

My time at Wisley was a whirlwind three weeks packed to the brim with meetings, rotating through various garden teams, and visiting gardens. The main goal of my time at Wisley was to understand what the vision of the RHS is and how it is executed through their gardens, research, and various programs. I spent two days on four different teams and also dipped into a couple of other departments for a quick taste of what they do. Wisley is a massive garden of almost 250 acres. With the work of around 80 gardeners and 100 volunteers, Wisley is home to one of the highest quality and diverse plant collections in the UK. In addition to the gardens, Wisley has a large number of science teams who are constantly working to discover new information that can then be translated to the wider public. My first week at the garden was the week of the Wisley Flower Show. The garden was bursting with visitors who were eager to explore the 55 different nurseries and 20 trade stands and the National Dahlia Show. My favorite tent was the "Gardening Advice" tent, which always had a long queue of people holding shopping bags with cuttings from their own gardens. Above the masses of people you could see various plants bobbing up and down on their way to new homes.

The first horticulture team I joined was the herbaceous team. This team is responsible for the borders surrounding the glass house as well as the 7 acres area near the main cafe. Within this one area of Wisley there are designs by three well known designers, which creates a stunning combination. The long border leading from the orchards to the glasshouse was originally designed by Piet Oudolf. It is designed as waves that sweep diagonally across the axis in blocks of texture and color. The borders surrounding the glasshouse cafe and lake were designed by Tom Stuart Smith. Large blocks of hedges provide a rigid backdrop against various ornamental grasses that increase in diversity as the path arcs around to the glasshouse. On the western end of the glasshouse are two meadows created by James Hitchmough, who I would later work with during my placement at Sheffield University. One is a North American Prairie, and the other is a South African Meadow. By getting on my hands and knees weeding within each of these borders, I was able to learn so much more about the designs. The gardeners are a wealth of information about what it takes to make designed concepts a reality in a garden.

The next team I joined was the glasshouse team. Each morning before the glasshouse is opened to the public, each gardener waters and tidies their areas. The glasshouse is arranged by climatic zones instead of by geographic regions, so as you move through the glasshouse you are moving from the tropics into the temperate to the xeric.



Long border at Wisley



Wisley apple orchard



Rousham House and Garden, Oxfordshire



Visit to Rosemary Alexander's home in Sussex

Most of the collection is kept out of display in the collections glasshouses. Once the glasshouse is opened, the rest of the day is spent caring for the collections by watering and tiding. I learned a new technique for staking floppy herbaceous plants that is fondly called the "3 loopy tie," which supports the plant while allowing it to grow freely.

The next team I joined was the formal team. This team looks after the most highly trafficked areas of the garden including the main herbaceous border, the country garden, the rose gardens, and the walled gardens. The main job during my time on the team was to move the Award of Garden Merit (AGM) border. We spent both days cutting back the plants and lifting them into crates to either be sent to the propagation team or to various parts of the garden to a new home. The AGM border is being moved closer to the trial garden, which will allow for the old border to be re-designed to better connect the rose garden, country garden, and long border. I also helped pruning the yew hedges in the new foliage garden. This garden is a testing ground for plants that might be used to replace boxwood because of box blight that is devastating boxwoods around England.

The final team I joined was the woodland team. This team takes care of Battleston Hill and the Arboretum. I felt very at home in this part of the garden because it had a lot of my woodland favorites from Alabama nestled into the weaving paths. I helped the team water some newly planted trees that will provide a screen between the garden and the large motorway adjacent to the garden. I also helped sort out lots of different plant labels that needed to be placed in newly planted areas of the garden.

While at Wisley, I was able to visit several gardens and landscapes near Surrey. First, I returned to Rousham House in Oxfordshire, one of the first English landscape movement gardens. It was a rainy Saturday morning, but the garden still had the same magical quality that inspired me to become a landscape architect when I first visited Rousham four years ago. I also visited RHS Hyde Hall in Essex where Robert Brett, the Garden Curator, drove me around the entirety of the nearly 220 acre garden giving me a very thoughtful tour of what the garden is now and the RHS vision for its future. I also got to touch the famous giant pumpkin grown this year at Hyde Hall, the largest pumpkin to ever be grown outside in the UK, weighing 605kg (1,333.8lb). I had the pleasure of touring Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, with Park Manager, Chris Moran, who explained how the site, previously an industrial wasteland, was turned into one of the most successful Olympic venues in history. The park incorporates cutting edge ecological practices while also serving as a development catalyst, which has transformed the east of London.



Passion flower in Wisley glasshouse



Giant pumpkin at RHS Hyde Hall



Glasshouse herbaceous borders at Wisley



Wisley glasshouse

Sheffield University

During October, I was at the University of Sheffield, in South Yorkshire. Sheffield felt a lot like home because, just like my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, it was the center of the steel production in the industrial revolution. But, woven within the skeleton of past industry is one of the greenest cities in the UK, with more than 70 parks and leafy neighborhoods.

I spent six weeks in the Department of Landscape Architecture, which is known worldwide for its pioneering research in ecological design. This was an exciting placement for me because it was bridging my interest in horticulture with landscape architecture. I was able to work with Nigel Dunnett, a former GCA Interchange Fellow and professor in landscape architecture at Sheffield. I sat in on different modules taught by both Nigel and his colleague, James Hitchmough, which covered ecology in landscape architecture, planting design, and greenspace management. Nigel and James are best known for their planting designs at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London, which stunned crowds at the 2012 games with flowery meadows on what had been an industrial wasteland just a few years earlier. I visited the park right before moving to Sheffield, and I was excited to learn how they allow an understanding of ecological systems into inform their design decisions.

One of the modules I participated in was taught by Nigel on a survey of ecological design in landscape architecture. Nigel began by talking about the feeling we get when we are out in the wild landscape and challenged students to bring that feeling into the garden. The premise of the class was that we cannot recreate nature. However, we can study natural systems and use this inspiration to understand how designs can function while making a striking visual impact. Ecology is understanding the natural processes, horticulture is understanding the roles that different parts play, and design brings the spark that creates an emotional connection. Landscape architects have the potential to be on the forefront of many ecological issues and maximize the potential of the landscape. This class explored how different facets of ecological systems like woodlands, wetlands, and annual and perennial meadows can be used in designs, especially within the urban fabric. They not only benefit the ecosystem, but also the people who live their daily lives in these places. This class challenged me to expand my horticultural knowledge from an individualistic understanding to a holistic vision of how plants function within a much wider system in the landscape.



Grey to Green project in Sheffield, designed by Nigel Dunnet



Euonymus autumn color in Sheffield Botanic Garden



Hiking in Peak District



James Hitchmough teaching a class field trip to local parks

Another module I participated in was Greenspace Maintenance taught by James Hitchmough. This class was not discussing how greenspaces are actually managed, but the theoretical concepts that should drive our approach as designers when engaged with the management of a design. A well designed landscape is not static, it must have an overarching vision for the future, and have someone at the forefront who understands how to get it there. Greenspace maintenance is not about getting more resources, it is often a case of using the resources at hand in the cleverest way to maximize the visual impact. The most interesting theory I learned in this class was the CSR Model. This model describes three different categories of plants: competitors, stress tolerators, and ruderals. All plants in the world have evolved to fit one of these categories. Competitors grow fast but require lots of nutrients to out compete other plants. Stress tolerators grow slowly, but can subsist through tough environments. Ruderals are weedy type plants that tend to easily appear on disturbed sites. By tweaking different environmental factors, like the nutrients of the soil or the disturbance to the area, different plants can be encouraged and others suppressed. We spent several days of class visiting several greenspaces around Sheffield to see firsthand the different implications of greenspace maintenance. This module was really challenging as a designer because it pushed me to understand the necessity of a long term vision for the execution of a project and a practical understanding of how to get it there.

The final module I participated in was Planting Design, also taught by James Hitchmough. This module was only 5 lectures long, but I walked away challenged to see planting design from both an artistic and ecological perspective. The main challenge of this class was that we must design places that people care about. Design is not just about plants, it is about capturing people's imaginations through places that are beautiful and compelling.

I also helped Nigel as a teaching assistant with his third year studio. This studio was exploring the design of a post-industrial site in Sheffield located across the river from an ecology preserve. We visited the site to perform a site analysis, brainstormed initial thoughts, and critiqued the students' work. I also had the opportunity to give a lecture on landscape architecture and ecology in America, as well as share some of my own research projects from graduate school.



Analyzing PhD research plots with James



Borders at Queen Elizabeth Olympic park in Autumn



Sketch of oak leaves in a Sheffield Park



Me and Nigel in front of one of his annual meadows

I spent several weekends hiking in the nearby Peak District, which was a stunning contrast of heather moors and yellow autumn woodlands. I took every opportunity I could to visit one of Capability Brown's crowning jewels at Chatsworth (set to be home to the newest RHS Flower Show in 2017). I also spent a weekend in the Lake District, where I explored quaint villages and enjoyed a sweeping view of the dramatic landscape. On my final day in the Lakes, I and two friends climbed Helvellyn, one of the tallest peaks in the Lake District, standing more than 900m. Back in Sheffield, the highlight of the end of October was celebrating Halloween and Guy Fawkes Night with new friends and lots of pumpkin carving, bonfires and fireworks.

My time at Sheffield University was really eye opening for me as both a horticulturist and a landscape architect. I am intrigued by the potential of understanding a plant not just as an object in and of itself, but as a part of a much larger system.



Hiking to the top of Hellvelyn, Lake District



Brilliant Yorkshire autumn color



James discussing the dynamics of CSR model on site



Up close study of CSR model in action

Eden Project

I spent much of November in the Southwest working at the Eden Project. The project began as a simple idea: to connect people with plants. Eden is a garden unlike any other. Built into the pit of an old china clay mine, it unapologetically reveals the interdependent relationship between humans and the natural world through every path, vista, and display. More than one million people visit the attraction every year. Every day in the garden I can hear the chatter of school children and families and visitors from all over the world as they explore the gardens and biomes. The most exciting part is that Eden's mission reaches beyond the boundaries of the garden to communities beyond.

I spent the first two weeks of my placement working on the outdoor garden team, which oversees the 40 acres of gardens surrounding the biomes. As a designer, this was an interesting place to start because it helped me to understand the overall layout of the site, how visitors are choreographed through the different sections of the garden, and how the overarching message of Eden is carried through each part. Much of the work was tidying areas and preparing for the winter slumber. We cut back many of the perennial borders, planted bulbs, mulched beds, and pruned trees. What I learned through those two weeks in the outdoor gardens is that Eden is always changing. What was medicinal plants one year might change to a display on southern hemisphere plants the next. Many visitors return again and again to watch the evolution. But each part of Eden always comes back to the central message of the connection between people and plants.

My next rotation was working with Jane Knight, who is a former GCA Fellow and the landscape architect for Eden. During this week, I realized how far the message of Eden reaches. I helped Jane with the design of a potager garden in a vineyard in China. I participated in a weekly walk that brings people who suffer from diabetes together for a stroll through the gardens and biomes. I also helped to evaluate the responses from schoolchildren on what they find valuable about play, and brain-stormed ideas of bringing those values to life in a new school yard.



Outside view of biome



Mythology garden



Winter color



Tidying borders in outdoor gardens

One of my favorite experiences was visiting the woodland nursery at Eden one morning, where young children and their mums gathered to construct fairy worlds and mix potions with leaves and mud and sticks. The mission of Eden to connect people with plants extends from two-year-olds at woodland nursery all the way to the elderly person suffering from diabetes. I loved getting to tag along with such a talented designer as Jane and watch how each project was approached thoughtfully yet boldly.

Next I moved into the two biomes that symbolize the spirit of the Eden Project. The architecture of the domes is inspired by the idea of a bubble. A bubble forms to any surface it lands on and sits lightly on the existing landscape. This idea perfectly encapsulates the idea of Eden, the idea that humans exist on earth sensitively and lightly in relation to the surrounding environment.

I began the month in the Mediterranean Biome. This biome is comprised of Mediterranean, South African, and Californian plants. Visitors can learn about vineyards, cut flower production, edible plants, herbs, citrus plants, and crops in Mediterranean climates. I spent most of the 4 days on the team planting bulbs and clearing away invasive plants and weeds in beds. I also had the opportunity to sit in on a meeting about the design of a new Australian exhibit coming in spring. This biome is also a hub for the story tellers who are constantly innovating new ways of grabbing visitor's imaginations and revealing exciting stories about plants and cultures surrounding them.

Before I headed to the Rainforest biome, I spent a few days working at The Lost Gardens of Heligan. This was an interesting contrast to Eden, which is a garden that is looking towards the future of the landscape. On the other hand, Heligan is a garden that looks back by paying homage to the gardeners who left to fight in WW1 and never returned home. The garden was lost until the 1990's, when a new owner discovered one of the old glasshouses under the over growth. It has since been restored, with old glasshouses, walled gardens, paths winding under rhododendrons and even an outdoor jungle. The gardeners still use traditional Victorian gardening practices, and I learned many new techniques in just three days there, such as pruning espalier pear trees and double digging in the walled vegetable garden. I was also able to work alongside Charlie Ive, who was the GCA Interchange Fellow last year and began working at Heligan in October!



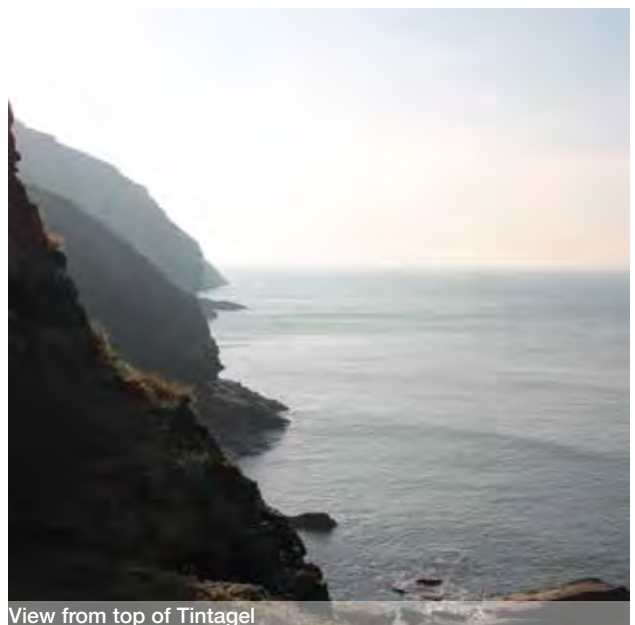
North shore of Cornwall



Woodland Nursery on Thanksgiving morning



Planting bulbs for spring display in Mediterranean biome



View from top of Tintagel

Back at the Eden Project, my final rotation was in the Rainforest biome. This biome is home to the world's largest rainforest in captivity! It has over 1,000 different kinds of plants. Visitors can get completely lost in winding through the different areas from tropical islands, to West Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia. At every point of the biome there is something to learn, from a rubber tree plantation, to banana trees, to how coffee is harvested, to how spices are created, to how coco is grown. Since the biome is such a fabricated environment, the gardeners are constantly having to battle issues that traditional gardeners would never face. The trees are not exposed to rain and winds like they would be in the wild, and they grow very tall in the bright sun of Cornwall. However, they are not forced to put on strength like they would be in the wild where there are the elements to battle. Lots of attention is given to tree care to ensure safety for the thousands of visitors. I even had the chance to watch the gardeners prune trees while they were hanging from ropes attached to the top of the dome. I helped with new plantings, clearing the upper walk that was being restored, and tidied up beds. One of my favorite jobs was going up in the cherry picker to tie bromeliads on the limbs of a tree. Bromeliads naturally grow on trees in the Amazon rainforest, so by using moss and flexible ties, the bromeliad is able to attach its roots to the tree over time. My time at Eden pushed the boundaries of my horticultural knowledge, but also challenged me as a designer to see the power of a simple idea executed with boldness and clarity.

My time in Cornwall was also filled with lots of visits to gardens and landscapes. I had the chance to visit RHS Rosemoor one weekend, and Jon Webster, the curator, gave me a very enlightening tour of the garden. Most weekends were spent visiting different parts of the stunning coastline. I saw many of the charming fishing villages on the North and South coast and explored bits of the Coastal Path that stretches 630 miles along the coasts of Devon and Cornwall. I also visited the gardens of Trelissick, Cotehele, and Lanhydrock. Even in the grey winter of Cornwall, the gardens are still breathtaking with their dark green shades of rhododendrons, camellias and sub tropical flora that characterize Cornish gardens. I also visited the mythical castle of King Arthur at Tintagel and the breathtaking landscape of Dartmoor National Park. I also spent Thanksgiving day in Plymouth, the site of the Mayflower's departure. It was a Thanksgiving spent on the other side of the story, and one I will never forget! The month of December was also packed with Christmas parties and village illumination celebrations! My favorite memory was watching Santa arrive to the village of Fowey on a tug boat accompanied by a samba band that paraded down the village streets.



Rainforest Biome blooms



Tropical plantings in Rainforest biome



Waterfall in Amazon section of rainforest biome



Largest rainforest in captivity

Great Dixter | January

In January, I began a three month placement working at Great Dixter, a delightful arts and crafts garden which is still remembered by many as Christopher Lloyd's masterpiece. He lived at Dixter his entire life, experimenting with new plants and combinations in the garden while also writing prolifically. The garden is now in the hands of Fergus Garrett, who has been the Head Gardener at Dixter for over 20 years. Fergus leads a quirky mashup of students and staff each day in the garden, continuing to push the boundaries of what is expected while also retaining the Dixter charm.

Great Dixter is a unique garden because it is not only an ornamental garden, but also a working nursery. The stock beds are woven within the fabric of the garden, creating combinations which are as experimental and exciting as the famous long border, but still supplying the nursery with the necessary numbers of plants to sell.

The first project I was able to participate in was the total remake of the High Garden stock bed. All of the perennials were cut back, lifted out of the bed and taken down to the Great Barn to be propagated for the nursery. There were a couple of weeks with consistent frost, but the bare soil was covered with wooden boards each night so that the ground was free to dig the next morning. Once the entire bed had been dug over three times, different groups of gardeners would begin brainstorming new combinations of plants for different sections. We laid out groups of canes, indicating where the clumps of plants would fill in. After planting, we wove in clumps of alliums, tulips, forget-me-nots between the groupings, which will knit together the different blocks of plants within the bed. Working at Great Dixter in the winter was one of the most exciting times of the year to participate in the garden because I watched how all the ground work was laid for the boom of summer and autumn.

We capitalized on the frozen ground to take the tractor into Dixter's ancient woodland and collect harvested wood. The woodland contains different sections of coppiced trees, and the wood is used for various bits around the garden such as tools, benches, fences, poles for climbing plants, frames for espalier trees, and hurdles to hold back perennials from the paths. We also spent time in the Great Barn propagating the different plants which had been lifted from the stock beds. I learned so much about plants by propagating them because I was forced to wrestle with the structure and understand the roots and the growing points.

My favorite part about Dixter is that it is just as much about people as it is about plants. It is made up of a combination of long standing staff, many who worked with Christopher, as well as a steady flow of students from all over the world. Each day was a chance to develop the garden and, in return, develop our abilities as gardeners to see plants in a more dynamic way.



Loading up to collect wood



High Garden covered in boards to protect from frost



Phlox sparkling with frost



Kitchen Drive on a frosty and misty morning

Great Dixter | February

In February at Great Dixter, the ever-changing weather had us jumping from propagation when the ground was too wet to happily marching through garden beds on those gloriously unexpected spring days.

After reworking the High Garden stock bed, the gardeners were able to move into other garden rooms before spring arrived. This began the rhythm of cutting back, weeding, preparing the soil for spring growth, and editing different nooks within each garden room. These adjustments come from observations on the previous year, responses to the future vision for the space, or new ideas to be tested. It was a bit of a dance moving through the borders, on a carefully laid grid of wooden boards, so as not to disturb the emerging bulbs and other early perennials. However not every area is lifted and redesigned each year, as this year in the High Garden, there are many quiet corners where plants grow with minimal interference, just a spring tidy up.

While moving through the garden beds we were lifting specific plants and dividing them. Half of the plant is put back into the garden bed, and the other half is taken to be propagated. This allows for the garden stock of the plant to be preserved while providing new plants to be grown on for sale or use in other parts of the garden.

One of the most exciting plants I was able to do this with was *Himalayacalamus falconeri*, a clump-forming bamboo, where the entire generation of the plant flowers about every 30 years and then dies. Each future generation must then be raised from the seed. I was lucky to assist in the entire process of dividing and propagating this rare bamboo, all the way from digging it up through washing its roots to see the growing points, dividing it down to single buds, and potting them on. It was exciting to watch the small bamboo plants grow in the cold frames over the following month.

One of the most exciting events in February was the pruning symposium where the Dixter gardeners, and other guests of the garden, gathered for a week to learn about the art of pruning and succession planting. Instead of looking at each plant and memorizing how to prune it specifically, Fergus Garrett, Head Gardener at Great Dixter, emphasized that we should be equipped to walk up to a plant, observe how it grows, and deduct how it should be pruned without even knowing what the plant is. The key, very simply, is observing if the plant blooms on old or new wood. We also learned ways to approach the same plant with different pruning techniques to give different results. For example, a *Cotinus* on the Topiary Lawn is wanted for its beautiful smoke-like blooms, so it is pruned more selectively to leave this year's flowering stems. But the *Cotinus* in the Long Border is wanted for its brilliant red foliage. Therefore, it is pruned so that all the flowering stems are removed and lush foliage is encouraged. After learning how to look at a plant and deduct what should be done, I felt much more confident in approaching a new plant and trusting my pruning decisions.

I was given an opportunity, by the RHS and Great Dixter, to travel with three fellow students at Dixter to the annual International Perennial Plant Conference in Grünberg, Germany. This was three days filled with inspiring talks by nurseryman, gardeners, and plant breeders from around Europe and the States. It was so inspiring to see the way knowledge was eagerly exchanged between perennial lovers from all nationalities and specialties.

The month was filled with many evenings spent with fellow students around the dinner table. We each bring different backgrounds, different ideas, and different experiences to the table with a common love for the garden. I love that the Dexter way of gardening is intuitive, inquisitive, and responsive, making each year a unique and thrilling endeavor.



Snowdrops in the morning shower



Dividing *Himalayacalamus falconeri*



Daffodils in orchard meadow



Hellebores from Elizabeth Strangman's garden

Great Dixter | March

By the time March arrived, the snowdrops were replaced by the bright faces of daffodils and the garden seemed to burst with something new every day. After finishing some of the last rounds of pruning, it was time to put the secateurs down and grab the trowel! As we had moved through the different garden rooms, specific pockets were left unplanted as we waited for the annuals to grow on in the frames. There is not a formula at Great Dixter for how plants move through the frames because it is changing every year with new bedding ideas and with different weather conditions.

After a few days of warm weather, it became crucial to plant out some of the plants that were ready such as *Papaver*, *Ammi majus*, *Delphinium*, and *Nigella* to make room for other plants that would soon be potted up to a larger pot size. The bedding pockets that are planted now will also serve a vital role in filling the June gap – a two-week period when most of the late spring perennials have finished and the summer perennials have not yet begun.

I felt a special connection to the High Garden since it was the first project I was put on at the beginning of January when I first arrived, and I tasted the delight of watching the invisible winter work become visible. What had been a grid of bamboo canes with a lot of bare soil in January began to turn more and more green with each passing day in March. By the end of the month, we removed the canes and the large planting blocks melted into a sea of different textures with rivers of tulips knitting it all together.

My final month was also filled with lots of little projects that exposed me to new skills and new facets of what makes up Dixter. I worked with another gardener to take lots of cuttings from some of the material that was pruned to create extra garden stock. I learned how to mix different types of John Innes soils for different uses in the nursery and in garden stock. I worked with two other gardeners to build a new chestnut wood structure to support one of the espalier pears in the High Garden. I also worked with two other gardeners to create the spring pot display in front of the house for the garden's opening, and we learned firsthand the complexities of arranging a display that appears effortless but exciting at the same time.

But one of my favorite jobs of the month was working on the new habitat pile in the field next to the nursery. We collected all the twiggy cuttings from the pruning symposium and began stacking it in interlocking layers. Different species provided different layers of textures within the pile, and many insects and little mammals will find a home within the shelter of this massive pile. Dixter is a garden that is not only provocative in its exuberant planting combinations and colorful pot displays, but also in the ways that it looks for every opportunity to serve as a catalyst for biodiversity. The giant habitat pile in the field will not only provide a home for many insects and animals, but also act as a visible statement that gardens are poised to impact not just the people entering the gate, but the surrounding wildlife as well.

I also had the opportunity to spend my final weeks exploring many local gardens. We visited Sissinghurst one evening after work just as the sun was setting to see some of the exciting restorations taking place. We also visited Gravetye Manor, the old estate of William Robinson, who was the pioneer of the wild garden. The head gardener, Tom Coward, walked us around, providing us with both the historical context and insight into how they are developing the garden. One of my favourite garden visits was to a private garden down the road, which was created by a husband and wife with seedlings they were given as wedding presents. Yew and boxwoods were carved into every shape imaginable. It was a garden so full of personality and vivacious spirit.

My last weekend at Dixter was the annual Spring Plant Fair, where nurseries from all across the UK and even continental Europe gathered to sell plants and celebrate the arrival of spring. This also meant that the garden was now officially open for the season, and it was so exciting watching the visitors' delight after so much hard work.

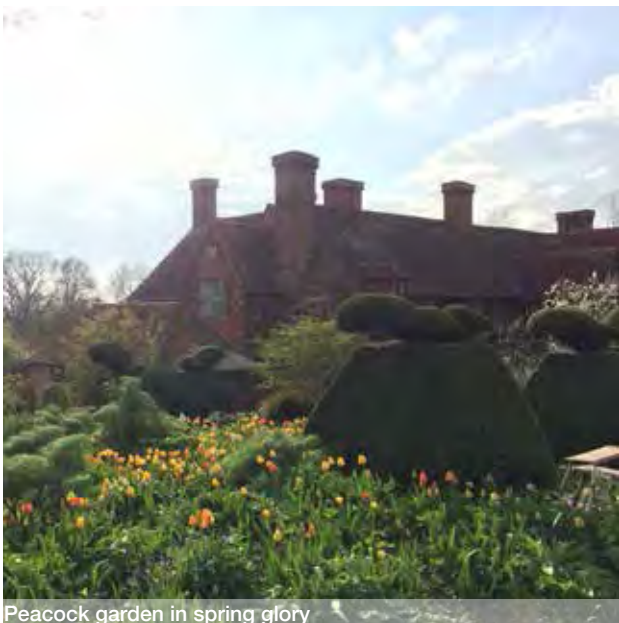
As I walked out the gate on the front walk for the last time, I was a bit overwhelmed thinking about how much a place and its people could teach you in just a few short months. Dexter introduced me to a whole new world of possibilities with plants. But Dexter also taught me that the true spirit of a garden lies with the generous people behind them, the curious hands and imaginative minds creating the garden and allowing people like a designer from Alabama to come along for the ride!



Building a habitat pile at the edge of one of Dexter's fields



Newly built Pear support with flaming tulips in High Garden



Peacock garden in spring glory



Fellow Dexter students with teachers Fergus and Kemal

Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

At the beginning of April I caught a train heading north to Scotland, where I would be working in the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh (RBGE) for five weeks. Out of the window of the train I could see that I was almost going back in time to the start of spring. Where tulips were already taking over in the south of England, daffodils were just starting to bloom in Scotland, so I had the pleasure of experiencing the joys of spring two times this season!

RBGE was founded in the 17th century as a physic garden, and it has a simple and bold mission: To explore, conserve, and explain the world of plants for a better future. This was my first time working at a botanical garden, and I discovered that there is so much that happens behind the scenes at botanical gardens than often meets the eye. Horticulturists and scientists are constantly traveling all over the world in search of new or endangered species to collect and bring back to conserve. Glasshouses in the background are bursting with a breathtaking array of diversity in plant collections.

I was eager to experience working in the collections under glass in order to learn about plants I had not yet worked with. My first few weeks were spent in the Arid Lands Glasshouse. The horticulturist in this area tries to push the perception of arid plants beyond just a mental image of cacti and spiky plants.

Filling the glass house were ferns from deserts, begonias from the arid woodlands of Mexico, and dozens of species of mosses and liverworts that are adapted to survive in harsh conditions. I loved hearing stories about where the plants were collected in the wild. Some were hunted in the deserts of Saudi Arabia while some were collected off roadsides in southwest Texas. The glasshouse is designed in two sections, Old World and New World. Different areas are planted according to ecological niches.

I loved that the collection isn't designed to be an exact recreation of nature. Instead, its aim is to capture the public's imagination through the lively combinations of different species. Instead of being a museum collection of plants, it becomes an exciting experience for visitors that pushes them to ask questions by piquing their curiosity through interesting combinations. Surprisingly, we had to water the glasshouse every day as the days were getting warmer. Watering in this house tries to mimic wet and dry seasons in the wild so that the plants do not revert into their natural dormant state when it becomes extremely dry.



Victorian Glasshouse at RBGE



Weeding in Arid lands Glasshouse



Mossy hills at Benmore Botanic Garden



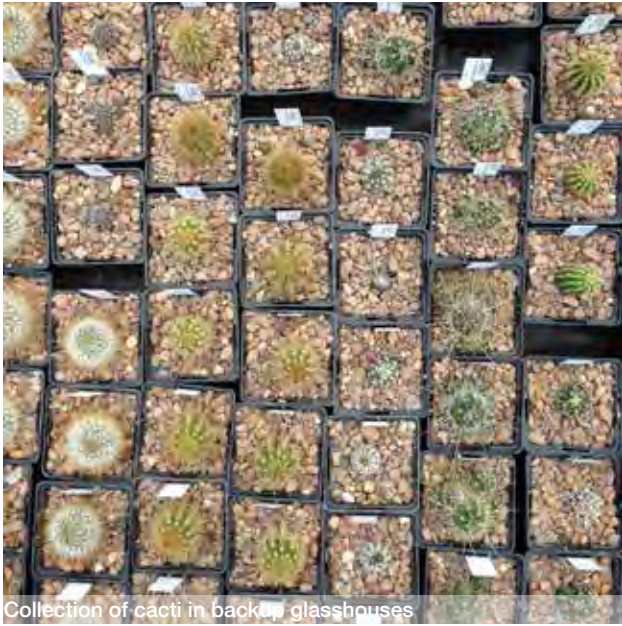
Pruning off giant leaves from banana tree

I spent the following few weeks in the Temperate Lands Glasshouse. This glasshouse has two levels that engulf you in a sea of green, from climbers to epiphytes to towering banana plants. During my weeks here we did everything from the critical daily jobs such as watering and tidying, to special projects such as planting out some plants from the backup glasshouses, removing a dead tree, and pricking out seedlings from collecting trips.

I also had the opportunity to spend a day outside of the glasshouses and jump in with the education team. Schoolchildren from all over the region come to the garden to participate in different educational programmes. I assisted with two different programmes. One teaches children about the life of plants, and another demonstrates all the different ways we depend on plants for a variety of uses, from food to clothing materials or medicine. It was so exciting to witness kids with hand-lenses looking for all the intricate parts of flowers and asking questions about everything from pollination to seed sowing. A huge facet of RBGE's mission is on education, because the future of conservation relies on all of us doing our part.

RBGE is a network of four gardens, including the garden in Edinburgh. I had the chance to visit two of the other gardens, Benmore and Logan. Benmore is located directly west of Edinburgh on the Cowal peninsula, filling both the valley and the mountainside. When we visited, the vast rhododendron collection was at its peak. Woodlands are some of my favorite bits of the landscape, and this West Coast garden kept me in awe with its mossy forest floors, towering conifers, and magical fernery in the hillside. Logan Botanic is located at the south-west tip of Scotland and is able to grow a huge variety of plants due to its micro-climate from the Gulf Stream, rightly giving the garden its place as Scotland's most exotic garden.

My time in Edinburgh was filled with several visits by friends from home, as well as a trip to Amsterdam with a friend from The Eden Project to see the famous tulip fields! Although my stint at RBGE was all too short, I left with a wider outlook on the role of botanical gardens in the future of both world plant conservation and community education. I have to say that my first experience in a botanical garden really set the bar high because of the level of knowledge and research that is taking place at RBGE with one of the most fun teams around!



Collection of cacti in back up glasshouses



View from Edinburgh Castle with hills of Daffodils in bloom



Isle of Skye



Fernery at Benmore Botanic Garden

Chelsea Flower Show

After I returned from Skye, it was time to bid farewell to Scotland and head south to London. It was time for the Chelsea Flower Show, the event of the year that fills a gardener's dreams! I had never been to Chelsea before, and I honestly did not know what to expect since I have always followed the festivities online and an ocean away. The festivities began with a dinner with many of the past recipients of the fellowship. It was an amazing experience for me to speak with people who had completed the fellowship and see what journeys it led them on afterwards.

I was able to see Chelsea the day before the show opened, as designers and their crews were still in their steel toe boots and neon yellow jackets putting the finishing touches on their show gardens before judging. My favorite parts of that day was listening to each designer explain to our group of RHS staff and committee members the concepts behind their gardens and the messages the gardens were intending to communicate. While a traditional garden will be intertwined with a story of its history, the owners, the gardeners, and the context that it was created within, Chelsea gardens are created in a little over a week in sectioned off corners of a flat show ground. There are no owners, no context, no gardeners, and the garden will be dismantled at the end of the week. Therefore, the designers need to create a narrative for their gardens, something that the garden is intending to communicate for their sponsors and something that is guiding their design decisions, hardscape materials, layout, plant selections, and overall character.

When I was in Sheffield, I was able to sit in on a meeting where Nigel Dunnett was in the beginning stages of conceptualizing and designing his Greening Gray Britain Garden for the RHS show garden at Chelsea. It was so exciting to see Nigel again at Chelsea, with the garden completely installed and packed with ideas of how a garden, no matter how small, can be functional and beautiful. I also really loved James Basson's provocative garden inspired by a limestone quarry in Malta. He used native Maltese species, juxtaposing the wild and persistent vegetation of the arid Mediterranean region against the grids of limestone pillars. This garden was the center of many conversations, some arguing that it wasn't a garden while others celebrated how it was pushing the boundaries of traditional garden design. However, it won a coveted Gold Medal and Best in Show. It was Best in Show in my book also because I think it successfully did what Chelsea gardens should do, which is to spark new ideas and discussion about not just our own backyards, but the wider landscape and our place within it.

Besides the main avenue show gardens, one of my other favorite parts of Chelsea was the marquee, bustling with nurseries from across the UK and the continent. During my free time at the show I would walk around and try to talk to the nurserymen and learn what it was that set them apart from the crowd. I also thought the Artisan Gardens were exquisite, especially Mr. Ishihara's Minimal Water Hut, a garden which contained an amazing attention to detail with effortless execution. My other favorite aspect of Chelsea was seeing so many familiar faces from my time here in the UK! It was surreal getting a backstage pass to all the events surrounding the biggest garden event of the season!



Chelsea in bloom store front display



Chelsea Pensioners in their smart uniforms



Nigel Dunnet in front of his Greening Grey Britain Garden



James Basson's Best in Show Garden

Winfield House, Royal College of Physicians & Inner Temple Gardens

The week after Chelsea it was time to move on to my week long placement at Winfield House, which is the London Residence of the United States Ambassador to the UK. Winfield is the second largest private greenspace in London, surpassed only by Buckingham Palace. I worked with Stephen Crisp, who has been the head gardener at Winfield for over 30 years. Stephen does not just maintain the gardens, but over the course of his time there he has developed the gardens magnificently. Even as ambassador after ambassador pass through the house, he is still there, pouring his life into the garden. He propagates almost all the plants used in the garden on site in 3 greenhouses. He completely redesigned the rose garden, the back terrace borders, and vegetable garden. He also is experimenting with perennial and annual meadows at the back of the property. Not only is he in charge of the entire garden, but also all the flower arrangements in the house, including decorations for holidays such as Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. From my first day there, I was in awe of the high standard of development that Stephen has given to the garden, day in and day out over so many years. Such dedication is so rare and incredibly valuable!

Stephen also set me up to work at two other London gardens during the week. The first garden was the Inner Temple Garden, where I worked with Andrea Brunsendorf and her amazing team of gardeners. Andrea has been the Head Gardener at the Inner Temple for 10 years, and has developed the garden into one of the most respected greenspaces in London. I arrived just in time to off load a truck load of plants that we began planting out in the borders. The Inner Temple is steeped in history surrounding the study and practice of law, and the gardens are expected to reflect the importance of the Inner Temple. Andrea and her team rise to the occasion time and time again by creating inventive border combinations, pot displays, experimenting with meadows under the largest trees and slopes of the garden, and, most of all, not settling for good, and instead, pushing for greatness. The garden is only open to the public during lunch time, when it becomes flooded with people on every inch of open space. If I worked anywhere along the embankment, I would be right there with them.

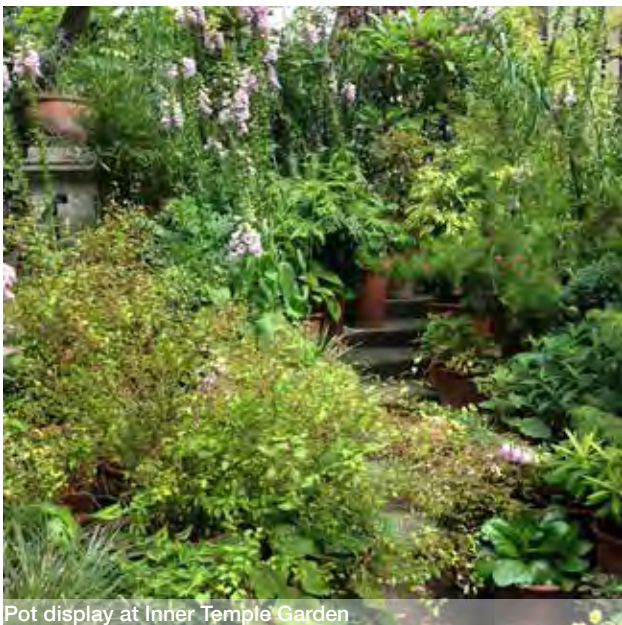
I also had the opportunity to spend a day at the Royal College of Physicians Medicinal garden with Jane Knowles, who is the Head Gardener in charge of the collection of over 1,100 plants with a connection to medical history. Plants are grouped according to their native geographic region, and I was lucky enough to work in the North American area during my day there. Jane has been a tireless developer of the garden, advocating for a green house, redesigning tired areas, and constantly telling the story of medicinal plants and their vital role. At the end of the week, I spent my last day back at Winfield House where I helped Stephen finish planting out the vegetable garden and watered the greenhouses packed to the brim with plants. I walked away from the week with in awe of the dedication of London gardeners to the places and stories they champion. Each garden has a specific role within the green fabric of London, and it is crucial to have such passionate, dedicated, and creative people leading these spaces into the future!



Plants waiting to be planted out at Winfield House



Meadow at Inner Temple Garden



Pot display at Inner Temple Garden



Vegetable Garden at Winfield House

Royal Botanic Garden Kew

My final month at the fellowship began with a placement at one of the most famous botanical gardens in the world, the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Kew is a vast organization on the forefront of plant exploration, collection, research, and conservation, and has been for over 250 years. Not only is there such depth to the research happening behind the scenes, but Kew's mission is to translate that knowledge and passion to the public, because humans depend on plants for life. At RBGE I worked mainly under glass, but at Kew I was placed with the Arboretum team. Here I worked mainly in the Rhododendron Dell. Although we were doing mostly weeding and watering, it was fun to spend time in a woodland area, especially since woodland species are my favorite. I also got to spend time working alongside several students from Germany as well as Kew apprentices. We conquered a couple of major tasks. The first was reclaiming an area of the Rhododendron Dell that had been taken over with nettle, dock, and brambles under a large oak tree. We also completed a large weeding project around the water lily pond and filled in some large gaps in the beds with different plants. Both projects were polished off with a fresh layer of mulch and the transformation was really satisfying! Each day after work I would spend time exploring a new bit of the garden, from the glasshouses to the alpine house, rock garden, long border, and woodland garden. One of my favorite parts of Kew was the Marianne North Gallery. This gallery was designed by Marianne to house 833 of her paintings from her travels around the world. It is an incredible display of artistic talent, scientific knowledge, and, most of all, sheer courage and curiosity to see the world and record it. Although my time at Kew was incredibly quick, I walked away with a deeper appreciation for the scientific work and conservation efforts of an organization like Kew.



Palm House



Palm house textural details



Cornus in bloom in Rhododendron Dell



Clearing weeds with fellow students

Tresco Abbey Gardens

After several weeks in London, it was time to head back west to Tresco Abbey in the Isles of Scilly off the western coast of Cornwall for my final placement. This placement was like ending a 10 month dream in an island paradise. It really is quite an event to reach Tresco. After a 6 hour train ride, three hour boat ride, and another jet boat ride, I finally reached the island. When I stepped off the final boat, I was greeted by Mike Nelhams, the garden curator at Tresco Abbey gardens. I jumped into the back of the garden's tractor vehicle, and Mike toured me around the little island, which took a whopping 10 minutes. On Tresco there is a food shop, bike shop, a few restaurants, and a pub. It is a funny mixer of people from holiday makers to seasonal staff to "islanders" who have lived and worked at Tresco for years. I could only catch glimpses to the sea as we drove around, so I dumped my suitcase in my room as quickly as possible and immediately hit some foot paths.

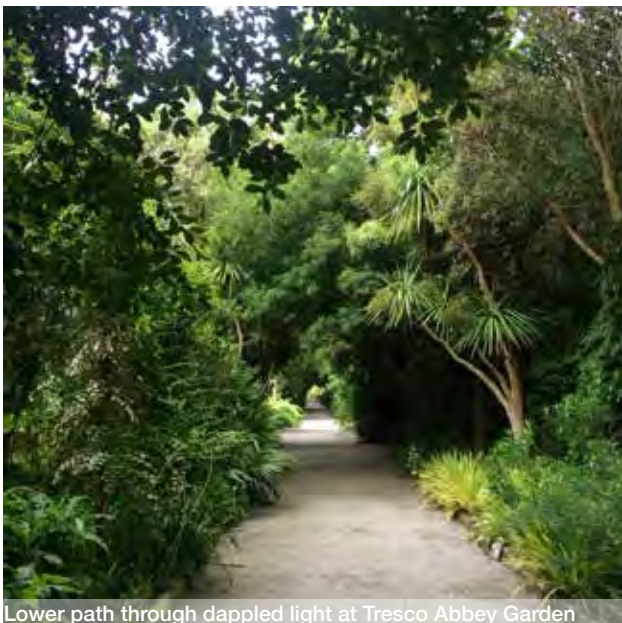
The view from the top of the cliffs are awe inspiring, with the white beaches and clear blue waters. Heather, grasses, gorse, and succulents create a spongy mat across the cliff tops, interspersed with areas of woodland. Although the surrounding landscape is hard to compete with, the Abbey Gardens rises up to the challenge. The gardens are known fondly as "Kew without the glass." After spending a lot of time in both Edinburgh and Kew in the glasshouses, it was shocking to see so many of the same specimens flourishing away from glass under the Scilly sun. The Isles of Scilly have a unique micro-climate. Although it is only 30 miles off the coast of Cornwall, it can grow an incredible range of tender subtropical species because it doesn't frost on Tresco. Well, except for in 1987 when there was a three day cold spell of frost and snow, and more than 70% of the plants in the garden were lost. But, since that year, the garden has been steadily rejuvenating its collection, under the watchful eye of Mike, who has been involved at the gardens for over 30 years now. Because the garden has many subtropical species, there is year around interest. On the annual New Years Day bloom count, there is normally around 300 plants blooming. I arrived to the gardens at the end of June and stayed through the beginning of July, which is the perfect time to experience the height of the garden. Tasks in the garden included normal duties such as watering pots, weeding beds, and tidying overgrown areas. But I also was able to help out on some really unique tasks, such as using the largest ladder to climb to the top of the largest tree ferns in the garden to saw off dying fronds. I also helped in the propagation glasshouses with deadheading and potting up. But one of my favorite areas to work in was the kitchen garden. The garden's purpose is to supply food for the main house, but excess produce is sold on a stand at the entrance to the garden and also distributed to the restaurants on the island. Each day there were tons of tomatoes, cucumbers, Logan berries, raspberries, strawberries, beans, herbs, and greens ready to be harvested. I also helped prune the espalier apple trees and plum trees. Each day at the Abbey gardens was an opportunity to work with new plants, learn new skills, and learn from the other gardeners. We also squeezed in a swim or two in the sea during our lunch breaks.



Sunset on 4th of July over the quay



Shell mosaic designed by Mrs. Dorian-Smith



Lower path through dappled light at Tresco Abbey Garden



View from hike around the Tresco looking towards Bryher

Final Thoughts

At Tresco, one of the plants I was asked about the most by visitors was *Araucaria heterophylla*, the Norfolk Island Pine. This 60 meter tree stands out amongst the others because of its unique form of branching. Concentric whorls of branches are stacked one on top of another with finely textured evergreen needles covering the symmetrical stems. It was one of the first plants that caught my eye when I entered the garden the first day.

Last year, when I found out I had been awarded the RHS Interchange Fellowship, one of the first things I did was buy a celebratory plant at a local garden shop. That day there was a little tree in the houseplant section that captured my attention. I had never noticed it before and it felt like the perfect plant to mark the occasion. That little house plant was a Norfolk Island Pine, and it kept me company all summer as I prepared to leave on this great British adventure. When I walked into Tresco and saw the giant Norfolk Island Pines, hundreds of times larger than my little house plant and towering over the garden, I was struck by the irony. I feel as if I began this journey a bit like my little house plant, and this past year has opened me to a world of people, places, and knowledge that I didn't know existed. Each placement has added another concentric whorl of experiences, stacking one on top of another and growing me little by little. I still have a lot more growing to do to reach the height of the Norfolk Island Pines I witnessed at Tresco, but this fellowship has grown me in ways I never expected.

I do not think I can adequately express my gratitude to the Garden Club of America and the Royal Horticultural Society for taking a chance on me and allowing an Alabama girl the privilege of learning under some of the greatest gardeners in the UK. This fellowship will forever be a substantial foundation from which my future career will continue to build.

I would like to especially thank two very important people. Celine Lillie who was my GCA advisor. Thank you for your support and encouragement from the moment I interviewed through the end of the fellowship. Your passion and enthusiasm for the GCA and the opportunities they provide for young students like me is invaluable. Thank you also to Rowena Wilson, my RHS lifeline and who brilliantly filled the role as my British mum over the 10 months, going above and beyond in every aspect. My experience on this fellowship is due largely to your selflessness, forethought, and gumption. Words cannot begin to express how grateful I am for you!

Thank you to each and every friend who invited me into your workplace, your home, your dinner tables, your tea times, your gardens, and your lives over these past 10 months. You each made Britain feel like home. Cheerio for now, I'll be back for you one day, Britain!

