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RHS Interchange Fellowship Mid-Term Report

While it may sound silly, my first memory of the UK was looking out of an airplane window, hovering over the highways below (or motorways as the Brits say), and thinking, “They really do drive on the other side of the road.” I would come to find that this would be the first of many customs I would get used to, although it took me quite a while not to defend having a perfect bill of health when asked, “You alright?”. Nonetheless, I acclimated quite quickly, and soon found a home in RHS Wisley, and the horticulturists and staff became like family. Over the past five months, I have been immersed in horticulture and English culture on an adventure that I feel so privileged to have gotten the chance to experience. This report reflects on some of my most prominent experiences at RHS Wisley, as well as my placement at Sissinghurst Castle Garden.

Trials Horticulture and Curatorial

I immediately felt at home in my first set of placements: Trials Horticulture and Trials Curatorial. After working at the University of Georgia Trial Gardens for two years, I was excited to work with a new range of plants and get a behind-the-scenes look at how trials are planned and managed. With the Trials Horticulture Team, I helped source *Centaurea* seeds and assess availability, update planners for upcoming vegetable trials, and summarize comments made by the public on their favorite trial entries in the *Hydrangea* trial. I also learned about the Award of Garden Merit (AGM), a concept similar to All-America Selections (AAS), and even got to observe trial forums for *Gladiolus* and *Lantana* where AGMs are awarded. It was interesting seeing how the panel dissected each entry, down to what seemed like millimeters between florets on *Gladiolus* flower spikes. I also enjoyed seeing some familiar *Lantana* cultivars, specifically *Lantana camara* ‘Miss Huff,’ which was famously found in the backyard of a Miss Huff in my college town of Athens, Georgia. The growth habits of ‘Miss Huff’ and other varieties that I have trialed in the states were vastly different from what I saw during the forum, as I am used to them being large shrubs, while the *Lantana* being evaluated were small and compact. When I asked horticulturists at Wisley how they felt about *Lantana*, I was surprised to hear it was disliked, but I’m sure their attitude would be greatly improved if they saw the beautiful, bushy *Lantana* that I know and love.

Most excitingly, I got to join some members of the Trials Horticulture Team at the Malvern Autumn show! I saw everything from adorable miniature show ponies, the biggest vegetables I have

ever seen in my life, vintage caravans and cars, alpacas, an insanely wide range of apples, and stunning floral displays and display gardens. Rumor has it that the biggest pumpkin broke the scale when they were trying to weigh it! I also had the privilege of shadowing the display judging, and I got an inside look into the analytical minds of some of the biggest figures in English gardening and public horticulture. I was quickly reminded how small the world of horticulture is when I saw that people I met at trial forums were also judges for the show. Also, after seeing the huge number of people in the display marquees after the show opened to the public, I realized how lucky I was to get a good look at (and good pictures of) the displays without having tons of people around!



(Left: My favorite display at the Malvern Autumn Show, Center: Gigantic pumpkins!, Right: *Philadelphus* spacing)

It was interesting to compare practices within the Trials Curatorial Team to my experiences working at the University of Georgia Trial Gardens. I found bed preparation at RHS Wisley to be slightly more intensive, which I learned as I helped prepare the beds for an incoming *Philadelphus* trial. For this, I removed large stones from the beds, graded the beds, collected soil samples, and measured out the spacing for the plants. We were also very particular about the spacing, increasing the distance between plants by 10cm more than planned to allow for optimum performance and evaluation of the trials. Interestingly, consistent irrigation was relied on at the UGA Trial Gardens, but at Wisley, trials like *Baptisia* were only irrigated once or twice during the growing season, and even then, it was only because of a significant drought. Wisley also hand-weeds their trial beds, whereas we tested stale seed-bedding and planting into a plastic cover to suppress weeds. A similarity, though, was how Wisley assessed lantanas both in-ground and in containers, like how the UGA Trial Gardens compares plants in the ground, in containers, and in hanging baskets.

A fun field trip I took with the Trials Curatorial Team was a visit to Mr. Fothergill's Seeds Ltd., a leading seed producer in the United Kingdom and abroad, and parent company of popular brands like Johnson's Seeds and D.T. Brown. We got an amazing tour of the production and packing facilities, seeing how the company is able to supply millions of packets of seeds each year. We also got to see their mock store displays of seed packets that proudly displayed AGM logos for their most

trusted products. The most interesting aspect of our visit, though, was getting a tour of their trial gardens. At just over an acre, Mr. Fothergill's trials a multitude of plant varieties, testing for success and overall value, and making sure their consumers get the best plants for the best price. What was so impressive about their trial operations was that it was all managed by just one person! Overall, my first month of working with the Trials Horticulture Team and the Trials Curatorial Team helped me bridge the gap between how plant trials are conducted in the U.S. and the U.K.

Welcome and Riverside

The second team I joined was Welcome and Riverside, where I mainly worked in front-of-house, in Oakwood, and the Pinetum. As fall was nearing its peak, we were busy lifting tender plants like *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop' and storing them at the propagation house, clearing leaves from under the *Prunus x yedoensis* trees in the entrance, and planting many *Hydrangea* in Oakwood. During this time, I also became familiar with traditional English weather, finally facing the cold and rain that I had heard so much about. In a way, it made seeing the stunning fall color of the trees throughout the gardens at Wisley all the more magical. Through a walk with "Shrub Club," led by the fantastic Jack Aldridge, and many inquisitive walks home from work, I became well-acquainted with some real showstoppers, like *Liquidambar styraciflua* 'Morraine' and 'Wisley King,' *Acer triflorum*, *Cotinus coggygria x obovatus* 'Flame,' and *Acer palmatum* 'Okagami'.



(Left: *A. triflorum*, Center: Foliage of *L. styraciflua* 'Morraine,' Right: *A. palmatum* 'Okagami')

The biggest job we took on during my placement with Welcome and Riverside was the planting of thousands of bulbs throughout the gardens. This was to prepare for a major tulip display this upcoming spring in celebration of the completion of roadworks near RHS Wisley. The mass bulb-planting was a garden-wide effort, with every Curatorial team joining together with their Hori Horis, bulb planters, and shovels on a Curatorial Day. Curatorial days are when all the Curatorial

teams come together to complete a big project, and they were some of my favorite days working in the gardens. I felt it was a great way to get everyone connected, share experiences, and feel a real sense of accomplishment at the end of the workday. Although we were planting tons of tulips, oddly enough, I am most excited to see the “Sneek Mix” of blue *Camassia* and various types of *Narcissus*, which we planted in the meadows of the car park entrance! This planting at the entrance has gone on for a couple of years now, and the goal with this space is to naturalize the bulbs that have been planted and increase the diversity of perennials in the meadow. I only wish that I could be at Wisley to see it this upcoming spring!



(Left: Planting tulip bulbs in the Sunken Lawns, Right: Me with a scythe)

Speaking of the car park entrance, it was where I first learned how to scythe! Although it didn't feel as awkward as trying to hedge trim gorse balls in the car park, it definitely took some time getting used to. When you get in a good rhythm, though, it can be very satisfying. I learned just how satisfying it can be after watching videos of synchronized scything from a national scything competition in the UK! It is truly an art, and one that I would be interested in bringing back to the states. I also first learned about deadhedging during my placement with Welcome and Riverside while helping to build a deadhedge framework with coppiced hazel (*Corylus*) stems in Oakwood for a masterclass. Not only are these features great habitats for wildlife, they also add structure and visual interest to a garden. They look especially good when there is one or two types of cut material being used to fill it. While the masterclass used bamboo (*Phyllostachys*) to fill the dead hedge, I have also seen gorse used as filler, as well as beech foliage, each one adding their own personality. To add to firsts, I saw my first Montezuma pine (*Pinus montezumae*) on a visit to Sheffield Park with some horticulturists from the Welcome and Riverside Team and previous students from RHS Wisley. The unique spherical habit of the *Pinus montezumae* ‘Sheffield Park,’ which is now over 100 years old and standing at 60 feet tall, was so fascinating to see.



(Left: *Pinus montezumae* 'Sheffield Park,' Right: A deadhedge in the Heather Landscape with gorse filler)

Herbaceous

While working with the Herbaceous Team, I explored different planting styles like the ones in the Piet Oudolf landscape and the plant collections that made up the South African Meadow and the Glasshouse Landscape. My favorite section to explore was the South African Meadow, where each morning, I was greeted by the beautiful red blooms of *Hesperantha coccinea* and the silver tufts of *Miscanthus* that glowed in the soft autumn light. While working in this section, I became familiar with *Kniphofia rooperi*, a “thug” in the South African Meadow, as I helped to thin them out in hopes of letting other South African natives establish better. Some of the plants we were encouraging to spread were *Kniphofia caulescens* and species of *Dierama* and *Watsonia*, which were displaying beautiful seed heads during my placement.

I also became acquainted with the planting in the Piet Oudolf Landscape while doing cutbacks and helping the team plant 23,000 bulbs. Louisa, who takes care of the landscape, gave some insight on how the plantings were arranged, describing the beds as a mix of matrixes and block plantings. With the matrix plantings, beds were focused on one or two types of perennials with other complementing plants surrounding, balancing continuity and spontaneity. Also, the block plantings have started to weave themselves together after over a year of establishing, creating a more softened transition between the different blocks. It all joined together to look like something similar to an American prairie, reminding me of the “Piedmont prairies” that I grew up with in Delaware. The Glasshouse Landscape also emanated an American prairie, including familiar genera like *Panicum*, *Agastache*, *Liatris*, *Eryngium*, *Sporobolus*, and *Achillea*. Interspersed in these plantings and unfamiliar to me, were *Catananche caerulea*, *Scabiosa columbaria*, *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl

Foerster', and *Phlomis tuberosa* 'Amazone', which are found in the steppes, meadows, and grasslands of Europe, Asia, and the Mediterranean.



(Left: Glowing *Hesperantha* flowers, Center: Plane tree branching structure, Right: Me pollarding a plane tree)

Outside of dissecting the landscapes and designs of the Piet Oudolf Landscape, the South African Meadow, and the Glasshouse Landscape, I got to do one of my favorite things: pruning! I very much enjoyed spending time on a ladder with my head in the plane trees (*Platanus x hispanica*) that stand near the Welcome Center at RHS Wisley. We were pollarding the plane trees, which helps to encourage new, dense growth, while also maintaining their shape and size. By pruning the most recent year's growth, we exposed the underlying branch structure of the parasol-trained planes, which was both beautiful and oddly satisfying. I also got to help Al, who oversees the Winter Walk, prune a *Euonymus* that was shading out the plants below it. It was fascinating to see how taking out one branch can lift the entire canopy.

Alpine and Rock Garden

Having no previous experience with alpine plants or rock gardens, I opted to only have a week-long placement with the Alpine and Rock Garden Team. This became one of my biggest regrets, as I wanted nothing more than to spend more time learning about everything that the team does. I became fascinated with everything from developing the design of spaces like the Rock Garden, the Fern Glade, and the Cushion House, to maintaining and propagating large collections of alpine plants and putting them on display. I especially enjoyed getting to pick which plants to remove from the Alpine Display House and replacing them with things that were just beginning to flower. My favorites that were in bloom were *Lachenalia bulbifera* and *L. viridiflora*, *Massonia pustulata*

‘Purple Heart,’ *Narcissus tazetta* ‘Aleppo,’ and *Crocus laevigatus*. I also got to climb the rocks in the Cushion House to plant a giant *Gypsophila imbricata*, which was a lot of fun.



(Left: The *Gypsophila imbricata* that I planted, Center: *Crocus laevigatus*, Right: *Lachenalia viridiflora*)

One of the most unique things I did while on the Alpine and Rock Garden Team, and probably in my entire placement at RHS Wisley, was making *Gunnera* teepees! I worked with Carla, who looks after a section of the Rock Garden and part of the alpine collection, on cutting back giant *Gunnera* leaves. In doing this, the big, fleshy buds were left exposed, and, although *Gunnera* can survive in temperatures as low as -12 degrees Celsius (10.4 degrees Fahrenheit for my American friends), they don't like to be cold and wet. So, it's important to protect them from the elements. We did this by laying their large leaves that we cut back on the buds, creating what looks like mini teepees! I am aware that it's not necessarily everyone's cup of tea. A visitor, after asking us what we were doing, said that we should stop and that it looked horrible. Nonetheless, we kept going, and I'm glad that we did because I think it's a very fun, architectural feature in the garden (and I think the visitor would've liked the look of the fleshy buds even less!).



(Left: Me with a massive *Gunnera* leaf, Right: The *Gunnera* teepees on “*Gunnera Island*” in the Rock Garden)

Woodland

The Woodland Team was another section that really surprised me, as I am not typically one that likes woodland gardens. Going into my placement with this team, I was really only interested in spending time in the Mediterranean Garden. I enjoyed getting to be around the myrtles, olives trees, and seeing the contrast of Italian cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*) with tall palm trees. I also fell in love with the different types of *Eucalyptus* in this section of the garden, like *E. perriniana*, *E. pauciflora* ‘Wisley Ghost,’ and *E. dalrympleana*, as well as oddities like *Pseudopanax ferox*. To my surprise, though, I found myself becoming more intrigued with Battleston Hill each day. I loved walking through the narrow paths everyday, watching the succession of plants starting to bloom, from *Camellia sasanqua* to *Chimonanthus praecox* to different cultivars of *Daphne*. A beautiful concert of scents developed over the weeks, and it was a special treat passing through a junction in the path called “Smelly Corner” (which is more pleasant than the name implies) where *Daphne* and *Chimonanthus* bloomed in tandem. My love for Battleston continued to grow even after my placement with the Woodland Team, as I would walk around and admire the blooms of various *Hammamelis*, my favorites being *H. x intermedia* ‘Harry’ and a massive *H. x intermedia* ‘Pallida.’



(Left: Striking *Eucalyptus dalrympleana* bark, Right: View of the Mediterranean Garden’s palm-lined steps)

Sissinghurst Castle Garden

Before finishing up my time at RHS Wisley, I spent two weeks living and working at Sissinghurst Castle Garden. I worked in the infamous White Garden during my first few days, clearing leaves, weeding, and mulching. While talking to Paul, who oversees the White Garden, I learned that Sissinghurst creates compost for mulching using a method called Bokashi. This is a low-maintenance, traditional Korean agricultural practice that “ferments” organic matter by covering herbaceous material and leaving it unturned. Doing this creates a closed, anaerobic system that

quickly decomposes plant material. I don't think I have ever enjoyed handling compost material more than Bokashi, as it has a fun, sponge-like texture, indicating its high water-retention capabilities. The rich, dark Bokashi mulch looked beautiful too after it was laid, as it contrasted with the silver artemisia and accentuated the boxwood-lined beds. Speaking of boxwood, I was curious as to how Sissinghurst managed to keep its boxwood hedges from being infected by blight and the box tree caterpillar. Interestingly, the horticulturists have noticed that nature helps to mitigate the issue of the box tree caterpillars, having observed blue tits, grey tits, and robins swooping into the hedges and eating the caterpillars.

The most exciting job during my first few days was pruning the beautifully white-blooming Japanese wisteria, which is trained on the Erechtheum in the White Garden. I had pruned wisteria in the summer, but never in the winter. Richard, who looks after the Delos garden, gave me great insight into pruning wisteria throughout the year, explaining that you cut back the previous year's growth to seven buds in the 7th month (July), and to two buds in the 2nd month (February). By cutting it back to two buds in late winter, the sap can build up in the flowering spurs, forming large flower buds and beautiful blooms in spring. While it wasn't quite February yet, it was worth getting the job done while everyone was working in the White Garden, as I found that things move very quickly in the gardens at Sissinghurst, and in preparation for spring, there is much to do.



(Left: Before pruning the Japanese wisteria, Right: After pruning the Japanese wisteria)

Richard also gave me a fantastic tour of the Delos garden, giving insight into its history and the inspirations behind the design. It was fascinating to learn that the Kentish ragstone walls mirror the landscape of the Greek island of Delos, strewn with the remaining frameworks of buildings that once stood some two thousand years ago. The landscape of Delos, described as a “phrygana,” is also shaped by long-term grazing and fire, resulting in a low-lying scrubland. To give the Delos garden at

Sissinghurst this look, Richard prunes shrubs as if he were a grazing goat passing through, creating a mounded look. He also lets plants self-sow freely, and for ones that have a harder time self-sowing, he finds the mother plant and puts smaller plants around it. To add scent to the overall experience of the garden, Mediterranean plants, including smooth oregano (*Origanum laevigatum*), apple sage (*Salvia pomifera*), and rosemary, were placed on the sides of the footpath so people could brush up against them and release their fragrance. However, due to high footfall, the plants had been trampled on, causing the beds and the edges of the paths to be roped off and obstructing this interaction. Richard did note, however, that the plants could do with a little more stress, similar to what they would experience on Delos, like wind or fire. Unfortunately, though, applying fire to the garden is not much of an option, so Richard must rely on the wind gods!

In my second week, I learned about coppicing, both traditional practices and techniques to enhance the visual aesthetics of coppices. I was especially interested in how the Nuttery is managed at Sissinghurst. Instead of coppicing in successional rows, stands of different sizes and ages are mixed about, creating a nice visual balance. Once used for agricultural production, the Nuttery is now more of an aesthetic feature in the garden. Because of this, the garden team has more freedom to mix rotations, remove stems that shade out the garden below, and let some of the stems bend outwards. Other areas of the garden are coppiced more traditionally, and the coppiced wood is processed and used for sweet pea frames, peony cages, stakes, rose benders, and poles for fencing.

Once it began to rain later on in the week, I retreated to the nursery and spent some time with the lovely Carol and Anita, the Growing Scholar at Sissinghurst. I enjoyed learning about Sissinghurst's in-house propagation and the different substrates used for the Delos garden's plants, as well as cleaning *Dierama* and *Papaver* seeds and looking around at all of the cool plants in the greenhouse. I was especially drawn to the *Begonia fuchsioides* (yes, a fuchsia begonia!) and a type of *Gazania*, which Carol said were two of Vita Sackville-West's favorites. If memory serves, the *Gazania* is nick-named after Vita, as the specific species/cultivar is unknown. There was also a silver feather grass (*Stipa barbata*) that really fascinated me, mainly by how it is propagated. The shape of its seed is like a spiralling dart, and after being taken off the plant by the wind, it pierces the soil where it lands. Carol mimics this process by piercing the seed head into the substrate.



(Left: Vita's *Gazania*, Center: *Stipa barbata*, Right: *Begonia fuchsioides*)

My placement at Sissinghurst wouldn't have been complete without learning about roses! I had the privilege of working with both Jade and Troy, learning about the history of Sissinghurst's roses and what the future looks like for them. Jade explained that Vita had a love for old roses, like Gallicas and other species roses, and that she built her collection in fear that they could be lost to time and from the rose breeding boom that gave us all of the hybrid teas and floribundas we have today. A major concern for the collection now is that roses just don't enjoy the climate of southeast England, and since the same roses have been grown here for the past 100 years, a monoculture has developed. This has caused issues like rose replant disease, prompting Jade and the garden team to develop a rose care plan. The plan is still a work in progress, but so far, the team has experimented with using dilutions of essential oils to prevent and treat certain pests and diseases. Jade has also been evaluating the different types of roses in the garden and determining how best to prune them. Her goal is to prune them in a way that fits Vita's vision while maintaining their vigor. Part of this means that they aren't necessarily pruning to produce an excess of flowers. They do bend some of their shrub roses, but only for a short time, after which they are rested.



(Left: The tower with the clock gifted by Harold, Center: My view while wisteria pruning, Right: Delos in the rain)

Closing

Before I conclude my mid-term report, I would like to thank everyone at both RHS Wisley and Sissinghurst for being so welcoming and for being amazing teachers. It really is the people that have made this entire experience for me so far. I also want to thank Emma Allen and Chris Moncrieff from RHS Wisley, Emily Hazell from the Chelsea Physic Garden, Sean Harkin from the Inner Temple Garden, and Matthew Pottage from the Royal Parks for having conversations with me about public garden leadership. I very much enjoyed hearing their stories of how they got to where they are today, and I can't thank them enough for their encouragement as I continue to grow in my career in public horticulture. And lastly, a special thanks to the wonderful Rowena Wilson, who has been such a vital support system for me as I navigate each new and exciting experience. I will never forget our detour to what we thought was Jane Austen's house (funny enough, we had actually ended up at her brother's house) and getting a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* at the Jane Austen House Museum. Rowena warned me not to collect too many books during my travels, fearing that my bags would get too heavy. This one was well worth it, though, as it holds a memory that will always make me smile and give me a laugh. I am so excited for what the next 5 months will bring, and I can't wait to share my experiences in my final report. Next up, Great Dixter!



(Left: Me, very smiley at Jane Austen's House, Right: Rowena and I on my last day at RHS Wisley)