

First Report for the Barbara and Philip Denny Trust

by Matthew Weston

With three months spent in the garden as apprentice already, during what has been a challenging time for all, this seem like the perfect time to report on what I have learnt, accomplished and what I look forward to in the future.

I feel very fortunate to have joined the garden team on 9th March, not only because it gave me a chance to get to work with Alfonso before his apprenticeship ended, but also because it let me gain experience in working with the passionate team of volunteers here before lockdown came into effect.

Life in the garden in March was a stark contrast to the outside world. As things for many people came to a halt, the garden team was busy planting and preparing to make the most of the season. I took part in a huge amount of seed sowing to provide plants for the garden and for sale. We planted a mix of plants in the south-east moat area near the Bishop's Park gate, which will be a beautiful invitation to passersby to visit the garden in years to come. I really enjoyed working with the other apprentices to plant the crop of potatoes in what seemed like a record time. We set up cages and nets over the brassicas and soft fruit to protect our crops. As the month drew to a close, we adjusted to the realities of lockdown and I excitedly started to plan the planting of the legume beds.

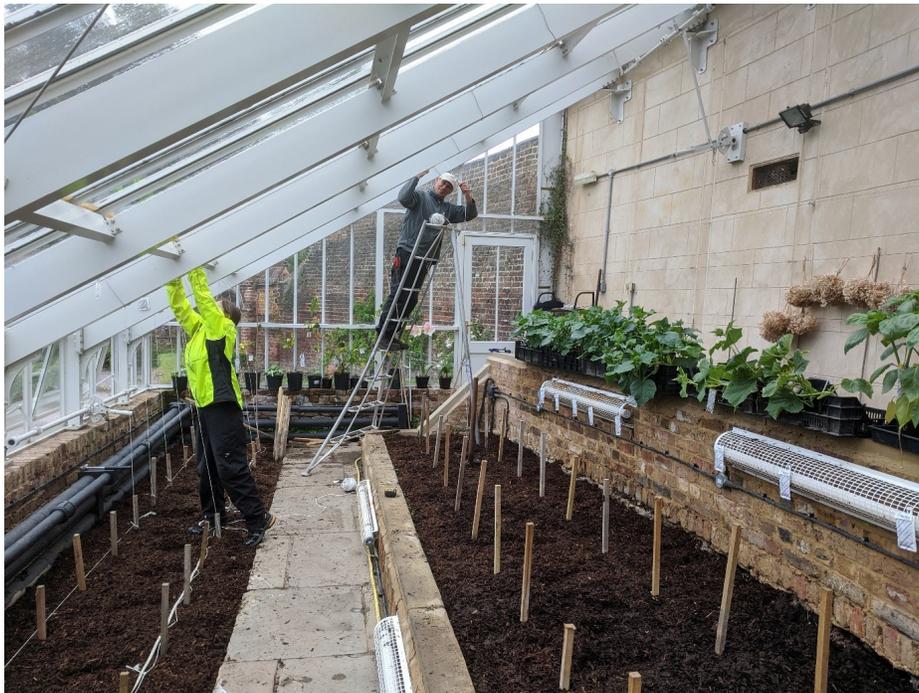


April was uncharacteristically warm and dry which made watering a priority most days. I felt honoured to be able to perform the first mowing of the season in the vegetable garden. There was something magical about seeing the seeds sown a few weeks earlier in the potting shed sprout into seedlings on the heated mat in the vinery. Learning to prick them out so they could continue to grow was a task that had a sense of harmony to it, which reinforced the reasons I want to work at Fulham Palace. If there was a single task in April that I enjoyed the most, it would have to be planting the main and succession crop of peas in the legume beds. Having sown the peas as seed, planted them out at the bottom of pea sticks, and taken care to protect them with netting, more than anything they rooted me to the garden and I am proud to say with the first crop being harvested this week. They taste amazing!





The last task I worked on with Alfonso before he left was probably the most visually stunning. Together us apprentices transformed the west side of the vinery by removing all the pots of plants and planted the tomato and cucumber crop. This was all new to me having never grown tomatoes before, but once the stakes and strings were in place the vinery was unrecognisable from the week before. Although it was sad to see Alfonso go, the tomatoes stand as a constant reminder of his skill and dedication.





May saw our team of gardeners shrink from six to four as Alfonso had left and Chris R. had to take sick leave due to his ongoing hip injury. This meant the team would have to reduce the list of tasks we focused on to keep the garden in the best overall condition for eventual reopening. It was a challenging month that saw all staff rise to the challenge.

The weather continued to throw up surprises, as the hot weather sent the temperature in the vinery up to a sweltering 50°C, only for there to be a late frost a few days later. Luckily, we were quick to respond covering out vulnerable plants with fleece to prevent damage.

I worked more in the walled garden in May than I had previously, and had a very productive period of direct sowing many vegetables in the miscellaneous section of the legume bed as well as assembling the A-frames supports for the French and runner beans. Not everything was plain sailing though, as an infestation of black bean aphids on the broad beans had the better of me and despite using several methods to control them, they continued to grow in number. The lesson I learnt from this is that broad beans are more resilient when planted out in November and grown outside over winter, and then removing the new growth even before the plant is at the ideal height, is still more advantageous than letting it grow when there is an infestation.





With June came the news that we would be able to reopen to the public and our volunteers. The tasks we focused on were making sure we could reopen safely and doing everything we could to get the garden into the best shape we could. With that in mind I planted the cut flower section of the legume beds and assembled wigwams for pale blue sweet peas to grow inside.

As I am writing this now, we have just had a Patrons' evening that allowed Patrons into the garden to see the team's hard work, and to trial the new social distancing set up of the barrow. I feel very fortunate to be an apprentice during such unpredictable times and I feel immensely proud to be part of such a passionate and hardworking team. I can see my time at Fulham Palace will continue to teach me a great deal about growing vegetables organically. The constant support of Lucy and Chris A. will give me a platform to develop my horticultural skills and understanding in the best possible way, giving me the foundation to build a long and joyful career in the industry. I am very much looking forward to starting college in September to study RHS level 3 in Principles of Horticulture and I cannot wait to have the volunteers back to share the garden with, and to pass on all that I am learning.

Thank you so much for funding this apprenticeship and making this all possible.

Matthew Weston, Garden Apprentice 14/06/2020