

The Lavinia Walk at Cholmondeley Castle

Head Gardener Barry Grain on planting a tribute to the lady who transformed the gardens

Visitors to Cholmondeley last year will have seen us marking out some new beds either side of a long gravel pathway running from the herbaceous borders down towards the temple garden. This new and important garden feature is called the Lavinia Walk, and is dedicated to the late Lavinia, Dowager Marchioness of Cholmondeley, and in celebration of her life's work in the garden here. So in January 2017 I sat down with Lord Cholmondeley and his family to plan the two year work program to implement these new borders, and design the planting scheme. This area of the garden is currently very open, and contains only expansive grassed areas and mature trees set back from the main axis, so all in all quite a dramatic change.

It all started with the marking out of the beds in the loose style of a Greek key pattern, with the larger sections 6m deep and 7m long, the smaller recesses being 3m deep by 5m long. Whilst the existing herbaceous borders would ultimately be incorporated into this new design, we left them for the time being, and in March marked then sprayed off the turf down the avenue to give the 'footprint' of the new borders. In April mild steel edging was installed along the inside of the borders to act as a barrier between the gravel path, with the plan in September to lay turf up to the edging to frame the borders. For now the beds were rotavated, and to save them being fallow until autumn we broadcast sowed Essex Red Clover as a green manure to help build up some bulk density and nutrient levels within the soil, which up until this point had just laid under turf. Now the clover of course is very vigorous so to save it running to continuous flower through summer and seeding itself everywhere we ran the strimmers over the beds 3 or 4 times during the course of the season to prevent this, and then rotavated it all in in early September.

Now, the idea of borders in this chosen shape may seem unusual, but the borders needed a backdrop of some form given the open nature of the site, and it was felt that running a hedge along the back of the borders (a more commonly chosen solution) was not for us. The family wanted to be a bit more creative, and also with these borders running from west to east the light and sun levels would be uneven throughout the year meaning uneven growth. Therefore in the grassed recesses we searched for a suitable variety of tree, to give all year round interest and act as a less formal non-solid backdrop. After much thought we selected *Malus hupehensis*, which for me is one of the very best crabs. It is very hardy, with good



"the 'footprint' of the new borders"

Photo: Barry Grain

vigour and constitution, and is the kind of tree that we could formatively prune to maintain a more compact, yet open and attractive habit. The real beauty of this Malus is its late white blossom from pink buds, small cherry red fruits, and superb autumn colour. These duly arrived with us from our friends at the excellent Cherry Tree Arboretum in Cheshire sometime in early October, and were duly planted without haste, all very exciting!

In the meantime we were working on the plant list, and were talking with our talented local blacksmith Matthew Hallett about some new ironwork supports to grow climbing roses centrally in each of the larger recesses. Roughly fifty percent of the plants in the existing herbaceous borders were to be kept, with most scheduled for lifting and division in spring 2018, but some like Penstemon 'Garnet', Salvia patens, and the superb Diascia personata would require propagating and planting out fresh, so our 'greenhouse man' Bill got busy with that. Of the fifty percent of varieties that would not fit into the

new scheme all were to be lifted, divided and distributed to other areas of the garden, thus giving us the impetus to also give areas like the glade and parts of the temple garden an overhaul.

So as to the new plant list, well, in Cholmondeley style, and fitting for the lady of its creation it is both bespoke and exciting. Borders with lots of interest all through the year are very much our preference here. So several varieties of hellebore such as H. 'Angel Glow' and H. 'Mme Lemonnier' were planted in strong groups around the base of each of the new rose supports as a good use of space and winter interest, along with carefully positioned groups of Euphorbia characias 'Wulfenii' to add permanent structure. Early to mid-season colour will start with thousands of tulips, with T. 'Carnival de Nice' and T. 'Estella Rijnveld' planted in ribbons all along the borders, and these will give rise to bearded Iris 'Carnaby' I. 'Caldron' and I. sibirica, Eremurus 'Cleopatra', Delphiniums, climbing roses and several fine selections of tree peonies from Kelways.

The colours change and intensify as summer progresses with bold reds and oranges, but also lots of pink shades. Season long colour is provided by Penstemon 'Garnet' and the still superb Diascia personata. Alstromeria, Helenium, Crocosmia, Lilium, Persicaria, Monarda, and ultimately Aster and Amaryllis belladonna to name a but a few continue the interest through the year and into autumn. Lots of half-hardy plants will be seasonally added every year with selections of Dahlia, Salvia and Canna, adding further textures and wow factor.

The borders themselves will be spectacular enough, but at either end of this walkway some real presence will be created. At the western end two pieces of statuary in the form of garlanded cherubs by Van Nost will be installed atop the rose garden steps. These two pieces have spent many years ornamenting the temple garden, and are from the third hall and gardens of the early 18th century, and will be restored over the coming months with final placement taking place in October 2018. At the eastern end, towards the temple garden, three classical stone benches will be recessed into a large half circle of hornbeam hedging that arches over the path. In front of these will be a central dedication from the family to Lady Lavinia herself, with carved stone, pebbles and a decorative urn, all of which is to be placed through 2018.

All told I personally cannot think of a greater tribute to such a fantastic lady gardener, who almost single handed transformed Cholmondeley into what it is today.



"At either end of this walkway some real presence will be created"

Photo: Barry Grain

The Lavinia Walk in July 2019

Having read Barry's account of the making on the Lavinia Walk, I couldn't wait to see it in full bloom when we visited for our plant fair in July 2019. The borders were already filling out and becoming the grand show they were intended to be.

I can't wait to see them 2 year on when we come for our plant fair on 18 July 2021.

