**Treading Softly through the Borders**

At the May meeting we were treated to a presentation about herbaceous borders by Ben Hope.

Ben has been gardening for 24 years, studying at Wisley when he left school, and for the past 16 years has been Head Gardener at a private garden in West Sussex. He also writes on gardening for various publications, and teaches, including at West Dean, and the Chelsea Physic Garden.

We began with a short history of the Herbaceous Border – starting in Victorian times, when the custom was to plant in straight rows, tallest plants at the back and shortest in front, with lots of bare soil showing between individual plants. Then a movement in the late 1800s/early 1900s, led by Gertrude Jekyll, William Robinson, Christopher Lloyd and others, introduced a less formal, and more naturalistic look, with an artistic approach to colour combinations. Later, with the two World Wars taking many men away from gardening, borders began to incorporate shrubs as they are less labour-intensive. More recently, we have seen the ‘Dutch Wave’, from designers such as Piet Oudolf, incorporating grasses along with herbaceous perennials, chosen as much for their structure as for their colours. Now, garden designers bring together all of these influences, to create a soft, billowing look.

The garden which Ben looks after was designed in 2006 by Arne Maynard, and Ben and his team have continued to develop it over the past 16 years. Herbaceous borders are backed by Box hedging, and include fruit trees, perennials, bulbs, and shrubs. There are 36 cut flower beds on the property, and this allows the team to experiment with new plant ideas, especially annuals, before incorporating them into the borders in subsequent years.

We saw many pictures of the beautiful garden at different times throughout the year, and Ben then shared some advice to achieve softer-looking borders:

Plant Choice – avoid excessive use of large or heavy plants, and incorporate small or low-growing elements, such as primulas or London Pride. Plant self-seeders, such as Euphorbia, poppies, and Forget-me-Nots, and underplant with bulbs to fill spaces before the perennials grow bigger.

Design – restrict the plant palette, and ‘Repeat, Repeat, Repeat’ the same plants throughout the border, reducing clump size when they grow too large. (Smaller clumps also help resistance to climate change – if one type of plant fails, there are others all around to fill in the gaps). The soft look is best when contrasted with something bold, such as topiary or a sharp hedge.

Maintenance – keep the borders fresh by lifting and dividing frequently, mulching and weeding, dead-heading, and the ‘Chelsea Chop’.

The next meeting will be on **Friday 21st June,** when Carol Guber will talk about ‘All Aspects of Fuschias’. Plants will be on sale.

Jo Myland