

July 2016

I am very grateful to the PGT who enabled me to study the RHS Level 3 Certificate in Practical Horticulture at Reaseheath College in Cheshire from 2015 to June 2016. While I had broad practical experience of gardening, I decided that formal training in practical horticulture would further my knowledge whilst beginning work as a self employed gardener. The award was £625 towards the training and assessment fees.

I found the course a really valuable experience, and it greatly improved my knowledge of the specialist areas in Level 3, such as learning to identify a wide range of new plants. Reaseheath has a wide and established collection of trees, ornamental shrubs and borders and we collected many seeds to propagate from the grounds. Part of the work was the construction of raised beds for planting the tree seeds gathered.

During the winter months I was trained and assessed in tree planting and top fruit pruning. We had the opportunity to spend a day under tuition, practicing apple tree pruning during a visit to Briarfield Orchard which has a collection of hundreds of varieties, many of which originate from Cheshire. I learnt whip & tongue grafting and aftercare in February and now have two healthy young apple trees. Pruning a wide range of ornamental shrubs and trees with varied requirements throughout the year using different techniques was also good experience. For my final assessment in June I was trained in chip budding and side veneer grafting for ornamental shrubs in the classroom, and I found the chip budding assessment in the nursery field of Sorbus commixta 'Ravensbill' onto the Sorbus aucuparia rootstock a new challenge, as it is done close to the ground standing over the tree in quite a difficult position. In Cheshire this has to be done as late in the summer as possible when outdoor conditions are right and the sap flow has slowed enough for the graft to be successful.

As I went straight into RHS Level 3, I particularly benefitted from broadening my knowledge of plant species, their growing requirements and how they can be used to best advantage in planting schemes, also how to identify and treat pests and diseases is certainly something that I will use and expand on. I found the soil analysis module really interesting and useful and can now adjust soil and the immediate environment to suit plants growing requirements accurately.

The training has given my gardening work a real boost and allows me to work on more specialist gardens as the RHS qualification gives clients the reassurance and value of the standard of work and knowledge. I am also able to offer a wider range of services. My gardening work is based in Merseyside and I have extended it to work in north Cheshire, now having more knowledge of that area.

I have already used the skills learnt in commercial apple tree grafting, when in February this year I worked with a local nursery which I hope to continue, and in future to develop the supply of shrubs alongside my work with a small scale nursery to supply planting schemes for clients.

I found that meeting a professional network of gardeners who are already working in the field (some having many years of horticultural experience) was also really beneficial and a great source of knowledge and skills, as was visiting inspiring gardens such as Bodnant and Woolerton Old Hall. I now aim to gain further practical experience and also continue my academic study with the RHS Level 3 Principles of Horticulture.



Helen Whitehead, Tree planting assessment, February 2016,  
Reaseheath College