

PROFESSIONAL GARDENERS' TRUST

BURSARY REPORT

Studying for RHS Level 2 in the Principles of Horticulture



Fig 1. *Filipendula rubra* 'Venusta Magnifica' in Trentham Gardens

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Contents

Introduction	ii
Bursary Award	iii
Other Sources of Funding.....	iii
RHS Level 2 Certificate	iii
Overview	iii
Reflections on the Course	v
Problems Encountered and Resolved.....	vi
Impact of Studying	vii
Summary and Conclusion.....	vii

Figures

Fig 1. Filipendula rubra 'Venusta Magnifica' in Trentham Gardens	1
Fig 2. Planting a perennial meadow at Trentham Gardens	ii

Tables

Table 1. Professional Gardeners' Trust bursary costs breakdown.....	iii
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Appendices

Appendix A. Professional Gardeners' Trust bursary award letter	
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Introduction

I am a career changer into horticulture. After graduating from university and working for several years in cities, moving industries from Transport Planning to Town Planning then Project Management and gaining qualifications to move me up the all-important ladder, I began to question my office-bound, urban career path. After moving back to my home county of Shropshire, I found escape in volunteering at weekends as a gardener with the National Trust in the Walled Garden at Attingham Park, and knew that this was the vocation I was searching for. When the opportunity arose, I successfully applied to become a WRAGS (Work and Retrain as a Gardener Scheme) trainee, a scheme administered by the Women's Farm and Garden Association (WFGA), within the Walled Garden and so began my year of practical horticulture training in October 2015. I volunteered at a number of other gardens alongside to gain as much practical experience as possible.

After careful consideration, I opted to complement my practical training by studying part-time over distance learning for the RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Horticulture, via the Horticultural Correspondence College (HCC), to give me a well-rounded and more in-depth understanding of horticulture. I started my studies in February 2016 and to date have taken five exams, with the final three due in February 2018.

Thanks to the training and studying, I now work as a gardener at Trentham Gardens, Staffordshire: temporarily revived historic public gardens, featuring schemes designed by Tom Stuart-Smith, Piet Oudolf and Nigel Dunnett. The gardens include a 10-acre Italian Garden, herbaceous borders, woodland meadows, grasslands and show gardens. My responsibilities cover plant and border maintenance, irrigation, wisteria and rose pruning, machinery use including tractors and mowers, designing formal bedding schemes and volunteer management.

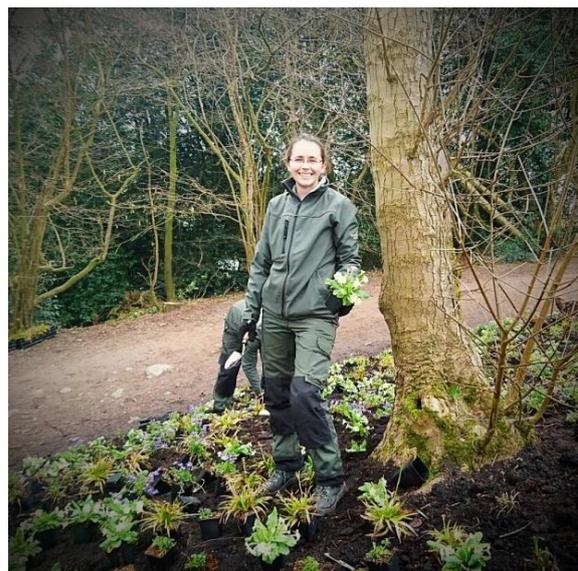


Fig 2. Planting a perennial meadow at Trentham Gardens

Bursary Award

My decision to change career into horticulture was a big one, not least for financial reasons, as I was giving up a regular income. When I applied to study for the RHS Level 2 course, my only income was a small training allowance from the WRAGS traineeship (£5 per hour, 15 hours per week). To assist with the costs for the course, I sought out and applied for a bursary from the Professional Gardeners' Trust, and was absolutely delighted when I was lucky enough to be accepted. In February 2016 I was offered an award of £260 from the gardeners' livery company, the Worshipful Company of Gardeners (see Appendix A for award letter). A breakdown of the bursary costs is detailed in Table 1 below:

Item	Cost
Course fees from the Horticultural Correspondence College	£395.00
Reference books (four key texts @ £30 each)	£120.00
TOTAL COSTS	£515.00
PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION	£257.50
BURSARY AWARD SOUGHT	£257.50
BURSARY AWARDED	£260.00

Table 1. Professional Gardeners' Trust bursary costs breakdown

Other Sources of Funding

Separately and prior to studying for the RHS Level 2 course, I applied for financial assistance from the RHS and the Studley College Trust to assist with a proportion of my costs for undertaking the WRAGS traineeship, including the administration fee and membership fee to the WFGA, mileage, subsistence, protective work clothing and essential equipment, totalling over £1,900. I was granted a bursary of £250 from the Studley College Trust in October 2015 and a bursary of £750 from the RHS in November 2015. The WRAGS traineeship is not linked to the RHS Level 2 course, as I decided to pursue this separately, however I have included these details here for transparency.

RHS Level 2 Certificate

Overview

Whilst I could have opted to study for RHS Level 2 through a college, the cost of doing so gave me hesitation, as did the distance I lived from the nearest horticultural college (the nearest is over an hour away). I decided to study the course over distance learning to give me the freedom to study flexibly in my free time, to fit in around completing my WRAGS

traineeship and volunteering in various gardens and, as I am today, working full-time as a gardener. Distance learning also worked out to be a far more cost effective option, with lower course fees and minimising the need to travel, other than to take exams. I chose to study the course via the Horticultural Correspondence College (HCC), whom a colleague had recommended to me. I started the course in January 2016 with an anticipated completion date of final exams in February 2018.

Course Content

The RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Horticulture describes itself as follows:

“This qualification provides a route to employment in professional horticulture by assessing knowledge of the principles underpinning horticultural practices, and supports career development for those already working in the profession. It also provides a foundation for further learning or training in the field of horticulture.”

The course consists of two parts: RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Plant Growth, Propagation and Development, and RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Garden Planning, Establishment and Maintenance. The syllabus of lessons is as follows:

RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Plant Growth, Propagation and Development

- Plant classification, structure and function
- Plant nutrition and the root environment
- Maintaining plant health
- Understanding plant propagation

RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Garden Planning, Establishment and Maintenance

- Understanding garden features, plant selection and planning
- Understanding the choice, establishment and maintenances of garden plants and lawns
- Understanding the production of outdoor vegetables and fruit
- Understanding protected environments and their use in plant cultivation

Delivery Method

The HCC delivers the course by a posting pack of 'course materials' (detailed notes relating to the syllabus), one lesson at a time, along with an exam paper that the student is asked to complete under exam conditions. Support is provided via a remote tutor, whom the student can contact via email or phone, if required. Once complete, the exam paper is marked by the tutor and returned to the student, along with the pack of course materials for the next lesson. The student can progress through the course at their own pace, with a limit of two years to complete it.

On successful completion of the course, the student is awarded a HCC Certificate. There is the option for the student to sit external RHS exams in order to achieve the formal RHS Level 2 qualification, by registering as an external candidate at an RHS Approved Centre. The exam fees are separate to the HCC course and are payable to the RHS Approved Centre directly. Exams are held in February and June each year.

At the time of writing, I have taken five RHS exams:- all four exams from the RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Plant Growth, Propagation and Development, and one exam, 'Understanding the production of outdoor vegetables and fruit', from the RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Garden Planning, Establishment and Maintenance. Of these, I have achieved two commendations and await three exam results in August 2017. I expect to take the final three exams in February 2018.

Reflections on the Course

I have very much enjoyed studying for RHS Level 2, and have found it useful and relevant to my training and working as a gardener. The most challenging lesson I have found so far is the very first, 'Plant classification, structure and function', as it is heavily science-based and focuses on botany, which is something you have to learn rather than necessarily absorb as tacit knowledge through practical experience. This is a critical lesson, however, so it's worth overcoming the hurdle. It provides the foundation for all other learning in the course, as understanding how plants function gives us the basis for understanding how, what and why gardeners do what they do.

Other lessons I have studied to date have had direct application on my practical experience and vice versa. My WRAGS training in the Walled Garden at Attingham Park has been particularly useful here, as it covered all the areas touched upon in the course, including understanding effects on plant health; identifying plant pests and diseases; plant

propagation via various methods; and growing outdoor fruit and vegetables. Having worked with plants directly makes the course content far easier to absorb, as I have tangible experience and examples to draw upon. Similarly, learning about a plant, disease, propagation technique, etc through the course can be directly applied when dealing with these aspects at work.

Problems Encountered and Resolved

A limitation I found with the course is not the content but rather the delivery method via the HCC. The course materials posted out for each lesson are extensive, and whilst these provide a wealth of information, it can have a counterintuitive effect of overwhelming the student rather than necessarily helping them. In my experience, when learning about topics for the first time, you have no frame of reference to help filter out what information is relevant and what is bonus detail. After several months of ploughing through the course materials and trying to absorb it all, my solution has been to use textbooks tailored to the RHS syllabus, including 'A Handbook for Horticultural Students' by Peter Dawson, as my starting point for learning and notes, then reading around the topics, both in books and online, to gain a fuller understanding.

Another downside of the HCC delivery method is the reliance on the written course materials, with support only provided via a remote tutor, which is only really useful if you have a specific question that you want to ask. There is no online content or interaction with other students, so learning relies completely on reading and understanding the written materials provided. Having since spoken to other students whom have used different distance learning providers, I understand that other providers use methods such as online videos or chat rooms to help their students learn; in hindsight, I think I would find such learning far easier than reading written notes alone.

Another issue I have encountered with the HCC delivery method is that the lessons are only sent out to the student chronologically, which presents a problem when wanting to skip ahead and study another module further ahead in the course. I wanted to take the exam in 'Understanding the production of outdoor vegetables and fruit' (the seventh lesson of the course) at the same time as the exams in 'Maintaining plant health' and 'Understanding plant propagation' (the third and fourth lessons in the course), as the material is more familiar to me given my experience of working in a productive kitchen garden, however the HCC only send out the lessons one at a time and in chronological order. My solution was to rely on learning from core textbooks and wider reading for this lesson. I will now return to the next

lesson the HCC has sent out, 'Understanding garden features, plant selection and planning' and will need to wait for the outdoor fruit and vegetables materials to be sent through later down the line before I can complete the HCC assessment on this module.

Impact of Studying

I have found that studying for RHS Level 2 has helped to build my confidence in my role as a gardener. Coupled with practical experience, my knowledge and understanding of horticulture has grown hugely since I first took the plunge in changing career in October 2015. Similarly, as my confidence has grown through working as a gardener, this has fed into my ease of absorbing and enjoying the course. I have particularly noticed this with plant identification; working with plants in the garden helps me to recall them as examples in exams, and similarly reading about plants through my studies makes me take notice of them when encountering them in the 'real world'.

I fully intend to stay in the horticultural field as my career progresses. At the time of writing, I am due to relocate to Bristol in a few weeks time, where I will search for a new role to take the next step forward in working as a professional gardener. RHS Level 2 is a common prerequisite of gardener roles, so I hope that my progress with the course to date will set me in good stead for job hunting. I look forward to completing my studies over the next few months and taking my final exams in February 2018.

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, I have very much enjoyed studying the RHS Level 2 course so far, and looking forward to the last three lessons to complete the course. I have found the content to be both interesting and relevant to my growing career in horticulture. If I were to have my time again, and in an ideal world, I may be inclined to choose a different distance learning provider that delivers a variety of learning mediums, such as videos and interactive forums, rather than just written materials. That said, the level of detail that the HCC includes in their course materials is extensive and covers the entire RHS syllabus and beyond. Wider reading has revealed that there is plenty of information both in textbooks and online that can help to make the information more absorbable.

Studying the course alongside practical training and working in horticulture has vastly improved my knowledge, understanding and confidence in my new career of horticulture. I look forward to taking my next step on my career path and putting my learning and training to good use.

Thank you again to the Worshipful Company of Gardeners for their financial assistance towards the costs of the RHS Level 2 course. I would not have been able to undertake this studying without this generous bursary.