

PG Trust Report 2016-17

Gary Leaver

I have been Head Gardener at Hill Close Gardens in Warwick for the past seven years, previously working as a Horticultural Technician for Birmingham University at Winterbourne Botanic Garden. In all that time have honed many practical horticultural skills but felt I needed a different kind of challenge to broaden my knowledge base. There are few horticultural courses that fit around those working full time and the RHS Master of Horticulture is one on them. It's not a cheap course at around £3700, but a good deal cheaper than comparable degree courses. It does however require a large dose of self-motivation and a great deal of reading.

The first year has gone by so quickly and suddenly I'm a third of the way through the course. Each module has looked at a different aspect of horticulture: the first one focused on the amenity sector and looked at the benefits of amenity landscapes and community engagement, as well as the challenges of maintaining these landscapes. Although much was familiar to me, the role of green spaces in the health and well-being of the population as well as the environmental services that they provide was interesting and thought provoking. The essays have proved a bit of a challenge, in particular the background reading and referencing. Unfortunately your own ideas count for nothing unless you can back them up with a reference!

Module two covered the propagation of familiar plants which I work with on a daily basis, although there had to be comparisons with commercial systems and discussions of new avenues of research. I thought this module would be an easy option but it proved a little more challenging than I first expected.

The third module of year one was all about operational business management which filled all the students with dread. However this turned out to be a very interesting set of assignments covering all aspects of management from business structures and consumer law to marketing and health and safety. Surprisingly, I have gained more from this module for my day to day job than from all of the others so far.

Year 2 has started and we have to choose options to look at in more depth. I'm starting with gardens and designed landscapes which is really where my skills lie. This really gets you to focus on the detail of a garden, in particular the layers of history created by different owners and the ravages of time. Most gardens were not designed with the intention of being seen by thousands of visitors, and this provides very real management challenges. This module will also be tested in an exam in February and I'll let you know how that goes in another report.

I am really grateful to the PG Trust for their financial support of £500 towards the course fees. The MHort is a massive commitment (even bigger than I thought) and not having to worry about the financing of it is a great help. Apart from the increased knowledge of different aspects of horticulture, the course has improved my skills of critical thinking, self-reliance and being concise in my written arguments, all of which I am sure will be a great

help within my current and future career. It has also been valuable and inspiring to meet a diverse range of like-minded individuals and it seems a shame that we only meet 3 or 4 times a year for module launches and exams.