

I was fortunate and delighted to receive an award of £570 which was funded by the disbanded Royal Botanic Garden of Manchester and the Northern Counties Trust, and kindly administered by Helen Seal at the Professional Gardeners Trust. I managed to track down a 'host' -Bristol Botanic Garden- that had the facilities I required and was willing to take me on for a two week unpaid work placement. The award funded my travel and accommodation costs for this period in April 2018.

I live in Yorkshire and have been a gardener for many years both self-employed and employed, latterly as a therapeutic horticulturist in Leeds. After taking a course in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture run by 'Thrive' I co-ordinated a gardening project in Leeds for people with mental health issues. Unfortunately after ten successful years the council funding was cut and although the project was partially self-sustaining it couldn't survive, and I was made redundant. Many people were dismayed and saddened by the closure of this successful and very beneficial service.

From this experience I plan to start another project running courses, where people with health and mental health issues can grow medicinal and culinary herbs and use them to make tinctures, teas, lotions as well as prepare healthy food to help alleviate their conditions. I feel this would be doubly therapeutic...the proven benefits of gardening alongside using herbal remedies. I have always been interested in herbs and have had training and experience of medicinal and culinary herbal preparation, but felt I would benefit from more knowledge of their cultivation. The aim of the placement at Bristol Botanic Garden was to learn more about the identification, seeds collecting and storage, sowing, growing conditions, soil, cultivation, propagation and recording both Chinese and Western medicinal and culinary herbs.

This was achieved by shadowing experienced workers and volunteers, working on the herb beds and in the greenhouses and potting shed, by conversation, study, photographic and written recording, and talks and tours by qualified experienced herbalists.

I set off enthusiastically for the 2 week placement which included;

1. A visit to 'Jekka's Herbs' the countries leading commercial herb farm just north of Bristol. Here I spent hours looking, photographing and making records. I also joined a guided tour by Jekka that was both interesting and informative.
2. A day at Oxford Botanical Gardens to see a different kind of physic garden layout, accompanied by the staff member responsible for community involvement.(who had also benefitted from a PGT grant for training!).
3. A day at St Werberg's Community Farm and Allotments in Bristol, specifically to visit the medicine garden, and also chat about community involvement in projects.

While at Bristol Botanic Garden I spent time with Tony Harrison an eminent Chinese herbalist, head of the Chinese Herbal Register and designer of the Chinese herbal garden there, this was interesting and educational. All the staff and volunteers were very friendly, welcoming, informative and knowledgeable. more than happy to answer questions and impart their vast knowledge and experience. I felt privileged to shadow and learn from such well qualified and learned folk. I was given varied and interesting tasks to complete. And helpful information both verbal and written ie plant lists, references for further learning, networking info. I spent a wet afternoon enjoying the benefits of the comprehensive library.

I think the greatest benefit for me was the one to one shadowing and learning, the 'hands on' gardening and being with other 'obsessed' gardeners who were happy to pass on tips and fascinating information. The networking advice and the positive attitude to my plans from everyone there were very encouraging. I have contacts where I live and a network of similar minded community / therapeutic gardeners/ herbalists. I also co own a plot of land, which will in time be the venue for my project, first I have some serious gardening work to prepare the site, putting into practice everything I have learnt from my work placement! I have returned inspired, determined and very grateful to have been given this opportunity, a fantastic experience. Thanks you Professional Gardeners Trust and may your good work continue to help and inspire others.