



Raring to go: HBGBS trainees have picked up invaluable practical experience and skills by working in heritage gardens

Education first

Education is a growing responsibility for head gardeners, who juggle volunteers, public expectation and the need to pass on skills to the next generation. **Hannah Jordan** reports

The latest batch of trainees to successfully complete the Historic & Botanic Garden Bursary Scheme (HBGBS) have cause to celebrate. Fresh from their 12-month placements at prestigious gardens around the UK, the trained horticulturists have just accepted their first jobs as professional gardeners.

The graduates are the fifth group to come through the HBGBS since it was launched in 2006 with around £2m from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The programme creates practical training positions in historic and botanic gardens by providing the host sites with around 50 per cent of the finance needed to support the trainees for a year.

With 360 applications this year for just 18 placements—192 more than in 2010—the need for this kind of scheme, which exposes trainees to the ever-evolving responsibilities of the head gardener, is pressing. Financial backing for the six-year initiative is set until September 2012, but coordinator Fiona Dennis is confident that new

funding will be secured to carry on the programme. “It is important that gardens take an active role in training the next generation. It’s no good sitting back complaining that they can’t get skilled staff,” she insists.

Passing it on

“We want to get as many host gardens as possible comfortable with training—we need to reverse the decline in skills in the horticulture sector and demonstrate best practice,” Dennis adds.

She says the host sites’ head gardeners need to not only impart practical horticultural skills and plant knowledge, but also to instil in their trainees people management techniques and, potentially, office skills. “Education is a growing responsibility, especially for the head gardener. If we don’t have practical training we simply won’t have the people who can do the job,” she maintains.

At Myddelton House, head gardener Andrew Turvey oversees not only his staff gardeners, but also a 14-strong volunteer team and one HBGBS trainee. Turvey says the scheme not only prepares

trainees to cope with the demands of the head gardener’s role at a historic site—no longer simply “managing the garden”—but also inspires team leaders such as himself to raise their own standards and improve their knowledge.

Taking on trainees is a responsibility that Turvey does not take lightly and he admits that it does add pressure to an already broad role. “There is now a great demand for us to ensure that our successors come through the field, so training is a hugely important part of our role,” he explains. “But responsibilities away from the garden mean that there is a real pressure to find enough time.”

Despite undertaking years of training himself, Turvey says many of the skills he needs can only be developed through experience. Forming an effective management style, learning how to motivate volunteers and developing ideas to attract more visitors, and inform them, are skills he has picked up along the way. “I have to think about what skills I have and make those useful and interesting to the public without spending too much time away from the garden. It’s a balancing act,” he says.

Turvey is frustrated by what he believes is a common misconception that the role of head gardener is not equal to that of other management positions, such as parks manager. "The sector needs to formally evaluate our job against other management roles in the horticulture industry. There is a huge salary disparity and I can't see parks managers having any greater responsibilities than us," he insists.

Professional Gardeners Guild (PGG) chairman Tony Arnold agrees that head gardeners do not get the recognition they deserve. "Salaries simply don't reflect the depth of responsibilities they now have," he says. "The industry needs to do something about the image of gardeners and demonstrate that they are equal to those in other trades and industries."

Under pressure

There is now much more pressure on some head gardeners, Arnold says, particularly those working at historic visitor attractions. Paperwork and greater public engagement are some of their added responsibilities, he explains.

To address the industry's evolving nature, the PGG wants to develop a resource over the coming years that will give head gardeners and other professional horticulturists access to advice on training, support and mentoring, to help them through their careers.

At National Trust site Hanbury Hall in Worcestershire, gardens and parks manager Neil Cook says his role has developed and "gathered pace" over the years. And while he was never trained to deal with volunteers, he has adapted to do so as Hanbury's team has grown from nothing to 50 members during his 23 years of residence.

Cook says being responsible for training is one of the most exciting and vital developments of his career, but reveals he was initially less enamoured with the introduction of computer work and the amount of administration, budgeting and human engagement the role has come to require.

People skills

"I came into horticulture because I was interested in plants and it seemed a great way to avoid people and paper. But I've evolved with my position into totally the opposite—I deal with a lot of people and paper," says Cook. "Gardeners, and especially head gardeners, need customer care skills. We are a visitor attraction and we have to engage with people—you can't hide in the bushes these days."

Colin Crosbie, curator at RHS Wisley, says the training role of a head gardener is not a new development, but is recognised more formally these days. "Education is something they have always done without realising it. They have always answered questions from the public and had trainees, but we use a different language now," he explains.

However, he says gardeners at the most popular historic sites may feel more pressure than others as public interest has grown. "There will be greater responsibility for those gardeners who work at sites with higher visitor numbers. We are first and foremost a public-facing industry after all."

The latest 2010/11 HBGBS graduates



Rosie Barratt

Background Postmistress, ecology degree, RHS Level 2 Cert.

Host gardens Tresco and Ness Botanic Gardens.

Currently Extended contract at Ness Botanic Gardens.

Comment "It was particularly useful to work in two gardens to compare the styles of both the gardening and the management. It helped me to realise what I wanted to do and where I wanted to work in the future, and added to my knowledge and experience in a way I would normally not have had the opportunity to do. I also met people who could help me with work in the future."



Vanessa Simon

Background Media studies, Foundation degree garden design.

Host garden Nymans.

Currently Gardener at Nymans.

Comment "The training developed my confidence, expanded my knowledge and helped me gain experience managing volunteers. It also enabled me to research a range of aspects of horticulture."



James Miller

Background BSc Hons horticulture, Writtle.

Host garden Beningbrough Hall.

Currently Longwood International Gardener Training Program, USA.

Comment "The placement has been an excellent professional experience all round. Possibly the biggest success of my time at Beningbrough was that it helped me gain a place on the Longwood programme. I started the day after my placement finished. Working for the National Trust gave me an excellent insight into the heritage sector and I feel that I learnt invaluable knowledge of conservation and ecology."

Frances Keeton

Background Rural skills support worker, HND horticulture, Diploma in plantsmanship, Scottish Agricultural College.

Host garden Threave.

Currently Gardener at Brodie Castle.

Comment "What surprised me most was how much the garden benefited from the project work I carried out. I was able to do research and surveying that the other garden staff simply did not have time to do, which made the presence of a HBGBS trainee particularly valuable."



Other historic gardening courses offered

National Trust Careership Training

A three-year heritage gardening programme for over 16s with no prior vocational qualifications. Thirteen trainees join the scheme each September with placements offered at National Trust gardens under the guidance of head gardeners. Practical experience gained on these sites is combined with 10 weeks of block-study periods at Reaseheath College in Cheshire.

Professional Gardeners Guild Traineeship

Trainees will work in three UK heritage gardens, spending a year developing practical skills in each. In-house training focuses on plantsmanship, pruning, seasonal planting and glasshouse skills. Training will be

provided, where appropriate, by local colleges. Gardens include Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, the Garden House in Devon, Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire, Chatsworth in Derbyshire, Ashridge in Hertfordshire and the National Botanic Garden of Wales.

The Heritage Horticulture Skills Scheme

The new four-year scheme, backed the Heritage Lottery Fund, provides 18-month traineeships in practical, heritage horticultural techniques at Aberglasney, Bodnant, Cardiff City Council, Dyffryn Gardens, National Botanic Garden of Wales, Newport City Council and St Fagans. Applicants must be over 18 and have a RHS practical level 1 qualification or equivalent.