

College-Based Training for the Nursery Stock Industry

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INTRODUCTION

Commercial horticultural production in the UK is based on approximately 10,000 holdings employing 60,000 people, including proprietors. There are 25,561,000 working people in the UK so the industry represents about 0.2% of the working population. Ongoing technological advances and large-scale investment in plant propagation over the last 30 years has meant that the industry's need for technically and managerially skilled staff continues to rise. In the period 1950 to 1980 the industry was adequately supplied with staff, recruited locally or via the land-based colleges. More recently there has been a serious shortage of suitable new staff in virtually all areas of production horticulture, with many advertisements for both technical and managerial staff failing to attract the desired applicants and the majority of enquiries to colleges failing to yield any candidates at all. The incentive to attract good staff and develop existing staff to their full potential has never been greater.

TRAINING OPTIONS FOR NEW RECRUITS TO THE INDUSTRY

Degree Courses. For school leavers, or people changing careers from other industries, a wide range of full time degrees (BSc) in horticulture is now available. Most of these have options in both amenity/landscape and crop production, which will give a sound introduction to plant propagation methods even if time limits the student's ability to develop expertise in practical skills. Degree courses are all studied over 3 in-college years. Some degrees offer a sandwich placement which gives the student the chance to acquire practical experience with an industrial employer.

Higher National Diplomas. These are studied over 2 in college years. Higher National Diplomas (HND) in horticultural production (or variations on horticultural production) are available from several of the colleges. Writtle College offers a nursery option which majors on, although is not exclusively confined to, nursery practice. Higher National Diplomas all include a period spent on an industrial placement, although the duration ranges from 1 year to as little as 6 weeks in the spring or summer, depending on the programme selected.

National Diplomas. BTEC (British Technical Education Council) National Diplomas are 2-year college-based courses. The plant propagation and nursery stock content varies with some crop production, amenity and plant production and garden centre management having a substantial amount whereas other amenity and commercial options major on landscape maintenance and edible crop production, respectively.

Pershore and Hindlip College, and Hadlow College, offer a dedicated Nursery Stock option and Merrist Wood College an option in Plant Production and Garden Centre Management. National Diploma courses usually offer a 1-year industrial placement period although this is now invariably optional. One year National

Certificate courses in Crop Production/Nursery Stock Production are available at several colleges and usually reflect the provision offered at National Diploma level.

Entry Qualifications. Usual entry requirements for degrees are two GCE "A" levels. For HNDs the requirement is one GCE "A" level. For the National Diploma it is 4 GCSEs at grade "C" or above¹. In all cases exceptions may be made for candidates who are over 21 years old offering alternative qualifications which can be deemed to be equivalent.

TRAINING FOR AN EXISTING WORKFORCE

Modern Apprenticeships. This is usually available through the Modern Apprenticeship Scheme, where the local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) subsidises the training by making an award to the training provider. This averages around £4000 per qualifying Modern Apprentice but the figure varies between different local TECs. A Modern Apprenticeship is available to young people up to the age of 25. A wide range of occupational areas are covered, 60 in all.

A condition of Modern Apprenticeship schemes is that they must include training up to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ, see below) Level 3. An employer can offer a reduced rate of pay to Modern Apprentices during their training and, because the employee is in training, this can legally be below the current National Minimum Wage. However, under the scheme the employer must undertake to give the trainee access to specified NVQ2/NVQ3 training within an agreed period of time and must cover associated costs such as travel to a college to undertake NVQs. The employer is not bound to retain the Modern Apprentice at the end of the training period.

Older Employees. For employees over the age of 25, colleges will usually offer the same NVQ programme but at a fixed tariff which may be paid for by the employer or student. This scheme is sometimes known as Career Link. This is still partly subsidised by Government because the College can access Further Education Funding Council monies but at a much lower rate than for Modern Apprenticeship funding. Short-term training courses for pesticide application, chainsaw use, and fork lift truck operation, to prepare staff for legally required test certification, are available from most of the land-based colleges.

NATIONAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

National Vocational Qualifications are made up of units and there are no time limits, age limits, or entry qualifications imposed by the awarding bodies. They are intended to be undertaken in the workplace or at least a place which simulates a candidate's workplace.

There are two aspects to gaining NVQs. One is the Performance Criteria which is a record of the candidate's ability to perform a set task competently and the other is the Knowledge Specification which is a record of written or oral questions. These questions test the candidate's knowledge which would be required to perform the task. National Vocational Qualifications are very much an active learning partnership between the trainee, employer, and the training provider and some workplace assessment will be normal.

¹ General Certificates of Education at Advanced level are the UK standard academic qualification studied between the ages of 16 and 18. The General Certificate of Education are the UK standard school exams at age 16.

Nurseries training plant propagators are most likely to encounter the NVQ Levels 2 and 3 of the City and Guilds 0135 scheme Intensive Crop Production although an older scheme 0133 Nursery Stock Production is still in use in some centres. The concept of Level 2 is that the candidate shows that they have the ability to do the job whereas Level 3 is intended to reflect an ability to plan and manage the task. Both the NVQ Level 2 and the NVQ Level 3 have six mandatory units and three out of a choice of eight optional units which include: "propagate plants from seed" and "propagate plants by vegetative methods" for the NVQ Level 2; and "plan and manage propagation from seed" and "plan and maintain the production of plants by vegetative methods" in the case of NVQ Level 3.

The choice of units and the fact that candidates are not compelled to take a propagation unit is in line with the NVQ philosophy of open access to anyone working in the industry. For example, someone working on a nursery which grows-on plants bought as liners should not be prevented from qualifying; although his or her certificate will not show any propagation accreditation. It is very much up to individual nurseries to agree the units which they wish their candidates to cover in order to best suit their business requirements.

PROVISION OF IN-HOUSE NVQ TRAINING BY INDIVIDUAL NURSERIES

There is absolutely nothing to prevent an employer giving informal training on an ad hoc basis. Only colleges have access to Further Education Funding Council monies and therefore career link NVQ training, but it is possible for any nursery to undertake its own Modern Apprenticeship training and hence claim funding from its local TEC.

There are several possible sticking points but none is insurmountable. One is that only Awarding Body Accredited Centres can award NVQs. A nursery is unlikely to be able to get true centre accreditation but it could apply to a local college or other training provider to become a sub centre site and thus latch on to their centre accreditation. A local college will probably request a fee per candidate but would in return provide guidance with paperwork as agreed, including help with negotiations with the TEC, registration of the candidate for accreditation, submission of the results to the awarding body for certification, and verification of a sample of both practical assessments and completed NVQ portfolios. The awarding body will insist on a sample of work being internally verified (inspected and approved by a suitably qualified person other than the assessor) in order to ensure an adequate and consistent quality of assessment.

Another possible stumbling block for the in-house trainer is whether the trainer is qualified to assess NVQs. The qualifications for this are Training and Development Lead body (TDLB) D32 (Assess the candidate) and D33 (Assess the candidate using diverse evidence). A nursery will only be able to assess its NVQs in house if a member of staff enrolls on a D32/D33 assessor programme. The D32/33 qualification is also obtained by completion of a portfolio to show that the trainer is a competent assessor. Many colleges offer "D" qualification guidance courses which are normally of 2 or 3 day's duration, plus telephone or visit support. A few TECs refuse to deal directly with production businesses as training providers and will only deal with colleges and other specialist training organisations.

TRAINING TO HIGHER QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE EXISTING WORKFORCE

Some colleges offer BTEC Higher National Certificates in crop production to be studied on a day-release basis over 2 years. These consist of 10 units and have a content which, when combined with work-based projects, is the academic equivalent of a BTEC Higher National Diploma. It is possible, by studying further part time modules, to convert an HNC to an HND if desired. Staff may wish to pursue post HND/HNC part time academic study. Degree courses can be offered at the discretion of awarding universities, typically over 2 days per week over a 2-year period. The availability of such courses will take into account the potential applicant's suitability and the structure of the course, so the possession of an HNC/HND will certainly not guarantee acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Training and education currently available in the United Kingdom appears to be complex in structure and the presence of different Training and Enterprise Councils do mean that access rules are not universal. However, in terms of both location for study, accreditation, and potential progression right up to degree level there is more scope for achievement and recognition for people in employment than at any time in the past.

Horticultural Study by Correspondence

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INTRODUCTION

The first correspondence college was the International Correspondence School which started in 1887 in America. It is now big business and all the colleges not already offering open learning or distance learning packages are catching up as fast as they can. The Horticultural Correspondence College (HCC) in the U.K. was started by a Mr. Ibbett in the early 1930s.

THE HCC CORRESPONDENCE PROGRAMME

Each student member receives lesson texts (usually 10 in all) to work through. These contain both information and questions. Some contain self-assessment material. The courses may commence at any time of the year and the college does not require answers back at specific intervals. The member is invited to send in their worked answers to the set questions. These are marked by their tutor, who returns the work together with a set of specimen answers, a marks profile, and a letter of encouragement. Most student members take about 1 year to complete a course. Help with further information is available from the tutor appointed by letter, and from ourselves via post, telephone, fax, and Internet.

When the student member is half way through there is a review of their progress and at the end of the course the tutor makes his or her recommendations for a grade