



RHS Conference: 'Horticulture, a Career to be Proud of'

Today, the gardening world gathered at the RHS Horticultural Halls, in London, to take the first steps to solve a serious problem; the current perception of gardening as a career. A recent RHS survey found 75 percent of under-18s think it's a career for dropouts, and 70 percent say it was never recommended to them at school.*

As part of the first National Gardening Week, 'Horticulture, a Career to be Proud of', saw key figures in the gardening world**, from Kew's top scientist to the Chelsea Show Manager, give talks to an audience made up of MPs, the media, representatives from the Horticultural and Educational Industries etc, in an effort to change the perceptions of horticulture being an unskilled, second-choice career.

Conference Chair, Alan Titchmarsh, gave a passionate and rousing speech (attached) calling on the horticultural industry to reach out to careers advisors in schools and highlight the enormous breadth and variety of careers within the industry. He also called on MPs to start acting now.

Alan said: "One in five young people are now out of work, and 100,000 more people are expected to be added to the current unemployment figures this summer. Our industry will need 11,000 new employees over the next decade, within this I include journalists, writers, broadcasters, garden centre workers, garden designers, arboriculturists, growers, marketing and PR executives, buyers, sellers, association workers, green-keepers, conservationists, florists, countryside workers, manufacturers, ground maintainers, charitable workers and local authority workers. All of them, in their own way, 'gardeners'."

The RHS survey showed that 75% of under-18s think that horticulture is a career for people who have failed academically. 50% of 25 year olds think it is an unskilled career, and 70% said horticulture was never recommended to them at school. There is an urgent need for this to change.

Alan said that part of the problem is the way gardening is perceived: “Gardening is ingrained in the human psyche as an occupation that needs stamina and tenacity but not necessarily intelligence. Horticulture as a career has an image problem of considerable proportions.”

Directed at the Horticultural Industry, Alan said: “We will need to be much more robust in our portrayal of the horticultural industry and to make those who advise on careers aware of the breadth of opportunities our chosen vocation has to offer.”

Another significant part of the problem, is that fact that horticulture is not recognised as a serious first-choice career option, by the government: “We still have people in high places who will smile sweetly and say they didn’t really mean that gardening was as unskilled as litter picking and that they realise it can be a rewarding activity.”

As a result of talks and discussions raised in the Conference, Twitter has come alive with comments:

- When at school, I was told that going into horticulture “would be a waste”. It seems attitudes unchanged, sadly.
- @MorrisLeigh Schools still assume that hort, or anything requiring practical skills, is a refuge for those who struggle academically
- “Schools careers advice certainly didn’t cater for my needs” Great talk on a career as a florist. Simon Lycett, Florist
- @OuterSpacesGD We were shocked by survey results! Let’s hope the #NGW conference paves the way
- What an amazingly inspirational morning at @The_RHS Careers Conference this morning
- ‘We need sustainable landscapes...It is up to us to engage with the gardeners of the future.’ Roger Burnett, Britain in Bloom #NGW
- ‘I am so proud to be a horticulturalist – those 30ys have been the best’ Jekka @The_RHS#NGW

- Very charismatic Damian Jenkinson – get young ppl into horticulture.
- #NGW We must promote a love of plants & landscapes in order to protect & improve on what we have & build desirability outside the industry

The need for all branches of horticulture to gain a mutual understanding of each others' roles in order to raise the profile of careers within the industry as a whole, was also highlighted. In a call for immediate action, Alan suggested: "I encourage you to make contact with schools' careers departments; to demonstrate what you have to offer. Arrange for school visits to your place of work. Open the eyes of the young to the opportunities on offer".

"People should see apprenticeships and other career paths such as studentships at horticultural colleges as a valued and valid alternative, not as a second best option."

To close his speech, Alan said: "I can't imagine any other career offering so much variety; so much opportunity to someone with little more to offer than enthusiasm and a willingness to have a go."

"The most rewarding and most important career on offer, bar none."

RHS Director General Sue Biggs called for a plan of action and list of recommendations to change perceptions and engage more young people. She believes the Government needs to better recognise and promote horticultural careers and qualifications.

Sue Biggs said: "It is quite staggering that whilst youth unemployment is at an all-time high, the horticultural industry has more skilled vacancies than it can fill in the UK despite the recession."

"The current education policy is not helping raise awareness of horticultural careers to young people. Today there is a lack of specialist technical skills, especially at higher levels, yet horticulture is not included within the school curriculum, and university degree courses with horticulture are decreasing. On top of this our survey showed that horticultural career opportunities were not highlighted to 70% of people when leaving education.

“A poor perception of the sector has resulted in minimal formal education and training schemes. Thousands of young people are missing out on incredible career opportunities – from gardening and garden design, the science of climate change and researching new pests and diseases to looking after the turf at Wimbledon or teaching children.

“We must promote career progression,” Sue says, “and commit to delivering a framework of horticultural teaching and training through current initiatives, including the RHS Campaign for School Gardening, horticultural colleges and qualifications, and new schemes, working with partners across horticulture.”