

HORTICULTURAL WHO'S WHO

CAROLINE JACKSON

The horticultural educator on how training can transform lives, and why she's passionate about passing on her knowledge to the next generation of gardeners

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PORTRAIT CHARLIE HOPKINSON

As a teenager growing up on a farm in Yorkshire, Caroline Jackson knew that she was always at her happiest when she was outdoors and that she would spend her life working on the land, surrounded by the plants and animals that she loved. As with many youthful dreams, life didn't work out quite the way she had imagined, although Caroline has gone on to spend more than 30 years as a horticultural educator enthusing thousands of young people with her passion for plants and the natural world.

"My dad was a dairy farmer and I had an allergy to cow hair, otherwise I would have studied agriculture and become a farmer. When I was young in the early 1980s it felt like the only options were either working in a shop or training to be a teacher or a nurse and I didn't fit into any of that. I was an outdoor girl, in love with Nature."

Caroline decided to get some work experience prior to college and found a job working on a commercial nursery in Cheshire. "It was a fabulous place where I learned so much. We grew everything – chrysanthemums for cut flowers, bedding plants, there was even a *Saintpaulia* [African violet] house, which was like a little cave. It was a really good foundation in growing plants and it had me hooked immediately." At the time every county had a college of horticulture and Caroline enrolled on to the Amenity Horticulture course at Yorkshire's Askham Bryan College. "To be honest, I didn't really know what the course was but I immediately loved it. It was full-time, three-year training. We were really, really privileged. We had a specialist for every subject, we weren't expected to work massively on our own. We were taught daily from nine until five."

After working as a gardener in Newcastle Parks and on the Windsor Estate, Caroline began to teach in the extra-mural department at Hadlow College. "It was mainly part-time courses and we all taught everything, which was sometimes hilarious, especially me trying to show strapping lads how to drive a tractor, which I was completely rubbish at."

Those early days at Hadlow showed Caroline the importance of training and lit in her a passion for passing on her knowledge and enthusing young people. "The level of teaching was wonderful and most staff had worked in the industry for a long time – they all knew so much and were passionate about passing things on. I saw

how inspiring first-class teaching could be to young people." Over the next 30 years she taught students from entry level to degree level and it is clear that she was an ardent and energetic teacher.

Caroline is now a freelance educator and works with the students at RHS Garden Wisley. "Teaching these young people is great because they are all so keen and interested. I also learn so much from them because there is always a student who has a passion for a particular plant and knows far more than I do about it." The RHS Practical Diploma and similar schemes at the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, and other botanic gardens are the pinnacle of horticultural training and Caroline is keen to encourage young people to apply to them. "Many ordinary young people from disadvantaged areas, don't realise that these places are open to them. They just have to be really interested. They should be encouraged to apply."

How to motivate young people to enter horticulture, an industry where wages are low and the work is physically demanding, is an issue that concerns Caroline. "The first problem is that it is hard for young people to realise what a diverse career it is. It is not just pushing a wheelbarrow and sweeping leaves." Colleges have a role to play in this. "It bugs me when colleges sell their courses as just gardening. Horticulture is so much more. There is so much technicality and so much artistry. When you meet an experienced gardener, it is staggering the breadth of their

knowledge about so many things. It is not just about digging a hole. We need to find ways to communicate that to kids."

When not teaching students, Caroline can be found canoeing the waterways of Kent or mentoring the head gardeners of gardens by landscape architect Marian Boswall. Imparting horticultural knowledge, whether to old hands or a new generation, is her passion. "I love teaching and what I like best is to watch people learn their plants. There is a tipping point with students where they walk in a park or around a garden and they suddenly realise that they know more of the plants than they don't know. And from that point they don't look at the world in the same way ever again. It is transformational. They now know that they can recognise and understand the natural world. And that is a great gift to be able to give." □

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