

A passion for gardening

Ever thought about turning your interest into a career? Eight Kent horticultural experts reveal the many opportunities on offer

WORDS: Leigh Clapp ♦ PHOTOS: Leigh Clapp

Did you know that the horticultural industry is one of the largest employers in the UK? A career in horticulture could mean anything from a hands-on gardener, a garden designer, grower or garden centre

manager, to a research scientist. There are many opportunities out there, whether you are a student looking for a study path or a sea-changer wanting to turn a passion into a career. January is a great time to assess your life and make New Year resolutions

to maybe do something you've always had a hankering for.

Meet some of the professionals working in the Garden of England to learn what they love about the industry, where they think the opportunities are, and let them inspire you to join them.

Viv Hunt

Godinton House and Gardens

For Viv Hunt, head gardener at Godinton House and Gardens, it was the joy of working with plants and the desire to get out of London, working in stuffy model-making workshops, that led her to change her career.

"I think a lot of people get into their 30s or 40s, the dreaded mid-life crisis, and want to change direction," she says.

"There are so many varied opportunities in horticulture; it's a career you can take in any direction that suits you."

What does your job include?

As head gardener I do a bit of everything: managing and training a team of gardeners and volunteers, planning planting and designing borders, presenting the gardens to tour groups and school groups, running gardening workshops and seasonal events and of course maintaining the gardens along with the rest of the team.

I really enjoy having a varied day and working with other people who get a kick out of making a beautiful garden.

The most challenging part?

Gardens naturally change constantly and you are always planning for the future and thinking ahead, but I think the most challenging part of any job is how you communicate with and motivate other people and that's no less true in horticulture.

What career advice would you give?

I started by volunteering at a local National Trust property and then took a course at a horticultural college while working in a large private garden. I'd always advise some formal training as it opens up so many more opportunities and usually gives you a network of contacts and support. The most important skills are flexibility – both in attitude and physically.

Where are the opportunities?

There is certainly plenty of work in the South East for well-trained gardeners both in maintenance and design and I think that there is much better recognition these days of the skills involved and that salaries should reflect that.

Volunteering at Godinton

We now have a place for a Professional Gardeners Guild

trainee each year, which is a full-time position with accommodation, and we have a large team of volunteers, some of whom are studying the RHS courses with local colleges or by distance learning.

We try to make sure that they are involved in a variety of work in the garden and we include them in plant identification training, which we do with the PGG student each week.

BELOW: Viv Hunt



Photo: © Godinton House and Gardens



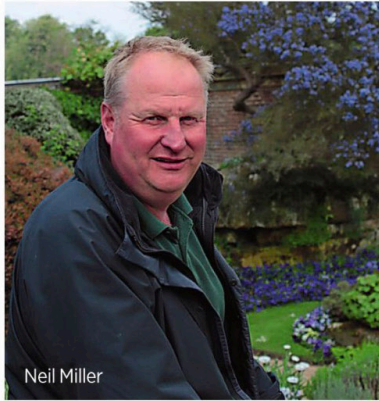


Photo: © Hever Castle

Neil Miller

Hever

Neil Miller, Hever Castle's head gardener, also came to horticulture later. When he was made redundant as an insurance broker in the city, he took the opportunity to turn his childhood passion for gardening into a career. After retraining, followed by running his own business, he joined the gardening team at Hever, becoming head gardener in 2006.

What is the best part of your job?

Without sounding too corny, the best part of the job is being outside with good old Mother Nature and interacting with the general public. And the most challenging part of my job is the paperwork!

What career advice would you give?

Firstly, talk to someone already in the industry and maybe do some volunteering to see if it really suits you and then just go for it; it is such a pleasing career and a wonderful family to be part of.

What are the most important skills to have?

Having the passion and interest is a must; the work will then seem just like a hobby and to be honest what hobby isn't enjoyable?

Why should more people work in horticulture?

Horticulture is such an essential part of our planet and we need to encourage more people into this industry. I feel that the future is very important as more and more people are realising that the increasingly artificial world we are now living in isn't a good one. I see many opportunities arising, as we all know that working back with nature is the right route to take.

Marian Boswall

Landscape architect

An historic garden specialist and landscape architect, Marian Boswall leads a team from her home studio in Staplehurst who all share a philosophy of combining a deep respect for the natural world with a practical, hands-on approach.

What interested you first about designing?

I wanted to understand how to live in sync with and look after the land, from growing a plant from seed to helping clients develop estate master plans; it was the nurturing part of the work that drew me in.

The best and most challenging part of your job?

The best part is seeing ideas become spaces, and designs making better places. It's always a thrill. The most challenging is managing profitability. Occasionally you get clients who don't pay their bills. That is not something we like to talk about, but it does happen.

What career advice would you give?

Think hard about what makes you happy and fulfilled and make sure you build that in to your personal job description. Check in every couple of

months to ensure you are keeping to that and looking after yourself as well as your clients.

Which skills are important?

The ability to listen, to be strong and to be well organised. To understand soil, plants and places and to be able to draw are a given.

Why is working in horticulture important?

As we understand more that we are just a small part of a whole system, we understand that the land and the plants we live with and rely on need people to look after them and to protect them – essentially from ourselves.

It is vital that people know how to do this, and horticulture is the most accessible training we have.

We have a fantastic history of teaching people how to garden in the UK; we have people coming from all over the world for our courses, and we should be justly proud of our heritage and skills.

We need to pay proper salaries for this life-giving skill. Gardeners need to recognise their worth and charge accordingly. We represent a huge part of the nation's wealth and value creation in all senses of the word.



Marian Boswall in her garden



Mark Reeve at Coolings Garden Centre

Mark Reeve

**Customer service manager,
Coolings of Knockholt**

Mark Reeve is the customer service manager and plant doctor at Coolings Garden Centre in Knockholt and has honed his keen interest since a teenager into a career. He enjoys being involved with plants, feeling the soil on his hands and being out in the fresh air and sunshine while helping people find the 'right plant, for the right place'.

What advice would you give?

Try to get experience if you can when you're at school, even if it's getting a Saturday job at a nursery or garden centre. Many people started out that way who are now high up on the ladder. Colleges such as Hadlow, Pershore or Writtle will do part-time courses or block courses,

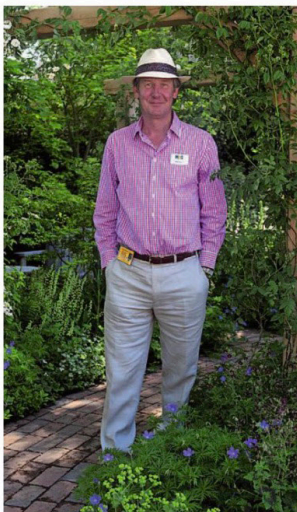
which are the best way to get some horticultural qualifications and practical experience.

Be able to deal with people and don't mind that you have to muck in occasionally. Experience isn't gained overnight and you will learn from mistakes, although hopefully not make them again!

Where do you see the needs?

There seems to be a lack of skilled and qualified younger people now as there was a period where the horticultural colleges didn't have a good intake of students.

Opportunities I think lie in the retail side of things rather than big private gardens; there does seem to be a big demand for gardeners for small gardens where people don't have much leisure time as they work long hours. They really don't want to be coming home after the commute to mow the lawn or weed the borders.



Roger Platts has a multi-faceted career in horticulture

Roger Platts

Garden designer

Garden designer, nursery owner and RHS judge, Roger Platts has had a love of horticulture since childhood, which led to formal training, work experience in nurseries and then setting up his own business in Edenbridge.

What advice would you give?

Consider what it is about the industry that interests you the most, whether it

is growing plants, garden centres, nurseries, garden design, amenity gardening or landscaping.

Contact organisations such as Horticultural Colleges, The RHS and The National Trust, Garden Design courses and trade bodies such as APL, HTA and BALI to see what courses are available and ask them where the training may lead in terms of an ultimate job.

Whichever path you choose to take I think it is important to have practical experience dealing with plants at an early stage, so working in a nursery or a

large garden is a very good way to start out. There are some good courses run by gardening organisations, which combine training with working, some full time and others part time.

Which skills are most important?

As in any career, you need communication skills and a commercial understanding. The specialist skills required depend upon the area of horticulture, but all aspects benefit from a good plant knowledge, including an understanding of soils and growing conditions.





Tom Hart Dyke has an absolute passion for plants

Tom Hart Dyke

Plant hunter, Lullingstone Castle

How would one describe Tom Hart Dyke, creator of the World Garden at his home, Lullingstone Castle in Eynsford: plant hunter, horticulturist or simply as he says himself - 'plant nut'?

I have a wide-ranging, eclectic passion for growing plants and I love travelling our green globe in search of horticulturally endowed beauties.

My interest was instigated by my influential Granny when she gave me a packet of carrot seeds at the age of three!

What is the most challenging part?

The physical nature of being a gardener is underrated; it's damn hard work! Being a gardener can also be a solitary occupation at times, although the rewards are unbelievably high.

What advice would you give?

Just go for it, follow your dream and passion to be involved in the world of plants. Get stuck in, get your hands dirty, learn from your mistakes and don't be afraid if you kill a few plants – it happens to all of us and is part of the learning curve.

You need heaps of enthusiasm, passion, a wondrous curiosity to learn and plenty of mental and physical willingness.

Reap the benefits

We need many more people to be involved in the world of horticulture, getting everyone outside and in contact with Mother Nature is essential in raising levels of fitness and mental wellbeing.

We are a nation of volunteers and speaking from personal experience, it's an awesome way in which to immerse yourself with plants. Thereafter the world is your oyster to explore a variety of avenues, whether it's bursary schemes, horticultural college or professional qualifications such as RHS courses.

The World Garden at Lullingstone Castle

A basic understanding of plant culture and husbandry is important for all aspects of a horticulture career whether ultimately on the ground or at a desk.

Why should more people work in the industry?

Horticulture is an extremely satisfying career to follow and much has been written recently about the health and wellbeing benefits.

There seem to be a large number of garden designers these days, as it has tended to be a trendy area of gardening. Careers in gardening are much better

catered for than they used to be and there are the courses run by the RHS, for example, which start with basic plant science and culture which if studied at the same time as working with plants and gardens provide an excellent foundation to whichever aspect is ultimately chosen.

Other directions to take?

One area of concern to me over several years is the lack of popularity in courses for growing plants commercially. The industry has changed a great deal due to mechanisation over the past 30 years or so, with

fewer people growing larger numbers of plants and huge quantities are imported from all over the world, especially the EU.

However, because of bio-security concerns, the demand in future may be for more locally grown plants, even if the cuttings or plug plants originate abroad, and we must have trained and experience growers capable of growing high-quality plants on a commercial scale.

Garden maintenance is also an area that could do with more highly trained and experienced horticulturists, as there

is a shortage in the private garden sector. The commercial perception of gardening tends to be of low pay and low financial return in most aspects of the industry, so it struggles to attract high achievers when they are choosing a career.

If better understanding of both commerce and communication is built into training, this would help in the long term. However, there is no substitute for enthusiasm and anyone passionate about what they do is bound to be successful. That's fortunate; horticulture is a career that is easy to be passionate about.

