

“The World of Horticulture and its Opportunities”

Discovery Day for horticultural apprentices and trainees
22 November 2019, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Introduction

The past masterclasses and, in this case Discovery Day, have grown from small green shoots some 12 years ago to be a really important platform for those who are starting out in horticulture and, by word of mouth, for those who are just beginning to contemplate possibilities and opportunities.

This year’s Discovery Day was held in and around the Lady Lisa Sainsbury Lecture Theatre at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RGB Kew). The lecture theatre was full with 226 delegates of whom 190 were apprentices and trainees. The programme took the form of talks, discussions, tours and presentations. Participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds and some had travelled considerable distances to attend.

The purpose of the Discovery Day was to draw in a wide range of trainees and apprentices from different organisations, both private and public, and to provide a day of opportunities to learn about possibilities in the wider field of horticulture. For this purpose, the day combined a series of short presentations with the chance to see “behind the scenes” in the internationally important Royal Botanic Gardens. The Gardens have a very rich and varied history, evolving from royal collections and pleasure grounds in the mid-18th century. We were very privileged that RBG Kew hosted and supported this special day in such a positive manner.



Mike Fitt and his support team assembled an excellent and varied agenda of speakers to lead us through short, engaging and sometimes revealing presentations which helpfully demonstrated a range of skills and learning areas as well as routes towards careers. These presentations reminded us how “horticulture” is an ever-widening and world-responsible subject which interlinks sciences, arts, commerce, well-being, environment, sustainability and living. In these fields we are already indispensable in serving our planet.

Programme

The day began with registration, followed by an introductory welcome by Mike Fitt (Chair of The Royal Parks Guild) setting out the programme, the allocation of tours for the afternoon session and requests to provide feedback to the organisers so that lessons can be learned, and improvements instigated for future events. Richard Barley (Director of Horticulture, Learning and Operations at Kew) gave a brief summary of the scope of Kew’s work and collections.



Tom Pickering: Nursery Supervisor in the Tropical Nursery at RGB Kew explained how he had completed the Kew apprenticeship scheme and progressed through several fields, eventually alighting in the Tropical Nursery which he claimed was probably the best job in the world (a claim repeated by several others during the day!). Tom confirmed what we all glimpse from the outside; RGB, Kew is a truly amazing and inspiring place, but still reliant on teamwork.

Tom's keynote talk was followed by six short and sharp presentations which showed a great diversity of subject matter and exposure. The speakers had been travelling different routes, sometimes from other careers outside horticulture, and they are at different stages of career progress; but all showed great enthusiasm and complete passion for their place in the horticultural world.



Faye Adams: currently an RBG Kew diploma student after a career change from dancing and education, via volunteering through Chelsea Physic Garden, and Fulham Palace and Gardens.

Georgi Ennis: qualified in arboriculture at Merrist Wood College, subsequently worked in subcontracting and is now part of the five-person arboricultural team at RBG Kew. A keen champion of Women's Arb Camps over the last 3 years - just do it!

Cecily Eltringham: having completed her degree, she found gardening by accident and came in through volunteering then joining The Royal Parks as an apprentice. Her presentation showed a huge variety of places and activities within The Royal Parks.

Jason Booth and Daniel Bradley: on behalf of the Institute of Groundsmanship. They explained their respective routes into this more specialised sector but demonstrated the wide range of opportunities in sports clubs, educational centres, professional sports stadia and golf.

Ben Preston: is Head Gardener at York Gate Garden, Leeds. With support from the gardeners' charity Perennial, he progressed through Historic and Botanic Gardens training to take on the Head Gardener role, leading a team of four at York Gate. He clearly has a passion for what he does; he stressed the need for the Head Gardener to be an "all-rounder". He also expressed the enjoyment of working with, and encouraging, people as both visitors and aspiring gardeners. He strongly recommended Great Dixter, Kent as a source of inspiration for all gardeners.

Miranda Janatka: After studying horticulture at Capel Manor College, she moved on to become a Kew diploma student which led to a role as a botanical horticulturalist at RBG Kew. Since then she has transitioned into journalism and TV gardening. She is now an editorial and content assistant at Gardeners' World magazine.

Lunchtime careers desks

This was informally arranged so that delegates could chat with the "experts" and pick up information about various subjects:

- Training and careers
- Parks, gardens and growing
- Sports and amenity turf
- Landscape and garden design

Additionally, delegates were invited to pick up a Certificate of Attendance for the day and to complete and submit feedback forms at the conclusion of the day.



The Tours

Delegates had indicated preferences and were accordingly assigned to tours of particular areas and specialisms within the Gardens. (With 190 apprentices and trainees bidding for preferred choices of two tours each, this was a challenge in logistics for the organisers). The tours on offer were:



- Working in propagation - Arboretum Nursery
- Working with endangered plants - Tropical Nursery
- Garden design in a Botanical Garden
- Managing Kew's tree collections
- Dealing with plant health and biosecurity
- Working in display glasshouses
- Growing and caring for alpine plants
- Caring for turf at Kew
- DNA and the Evolution Garden

The visits were led by members of RBG Kew staff.

Conclusion and thanks

In conclusion, Richard Barley commented that the event appeared to be a great success and was fully worthwhile. He reinforced the message of “opportunities” and the broad horizons of the horticultural world as demonstrated by the speakers and the tours. Richard said that this is a field in which, as individuals and as teams, we really can make a difference, both here in London, in the regions and around the world. He finished by encouraging everyone to continue to share the common goals, ideas, interests and practical applications found in horticulture. “We are a family; we can make the difference”, was his rallying cry!

Closing the event, Mike Fitt added his thanks to the Discovery Day steering group and The Royal Parks Guild volunteers who had helped to organise and guide the event. He particularly thanked RBG Kew for providing the venue and their staff who had contributed to make it all work so well. He thanked the Kew Guild, London Gardens Network and Chelsea Physic Garden for their generous sponsorship, and expressed his appreciation of the support readily given by a range of organisations. As delegates departed, they were presented with a ‘goody bag’ kindly arranged by the Landscape Show and London School of Garden Design.

This was a truly extraordinary and memorable event which, we hope, will have encouraged some, and inspired others, to find their feet and future careers in the wider world of horticulture. By any measure this was enabled by the sheer hard work of Mike and his team, by the generous hosting and efficient support of the RBG Kew staff, and by the enthusiasm and willingness of participants, speakers and advisors. At the end of the day, Mike asked the question as to whether he should contemplate organising another such Discovery Day in the future. There was unanimous applause and confirmation that he, and we, should certainly do so to enable and encourage another generation of horticulturists.

Report by Richard Flenley

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