



THE BENEFITS OF BEING A STUDENT MEMBER

MEMBERSHIP

Fran Suckling talks about how student membership of the Eastern Branch is helping her with studying for the RHS Master of Horticulture qualification.

After leaving school at 16, I went straight into a job with a high street bank and worked there full-time and part-time for the next 22 years. By 2005 I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with their changing ethos, trying to reach sales targets at the expense of providing good customer service, I felt. While browsing through the job adverts in the local paper I spotted an ad for Assistant Head Gardener at Knebworth Park and thought to myself how fantastic it would be to have a job like that, doing what you are passionate about every day and getting paid for it!

I knew I didn't have the qualifications or experience to apply but I couldn't get the idea out of my head and in the end wrote to the Head Gardener explaining that although I wasn't applying for that job, I would appreciate his advice on how to go about training for something similar. He asked me to meet with him for a chat when he suggested studying for RHS qualifications in the evenings and gave me a seasonal job part-time, fitting in with my hours at the bank, so I could gain some experience and see if I really wanted to garden full-time. I remember my first week there was in freezing cold, wet, windy March and I spent two days digging out a path, laying weed suppressing membrane and bark with the other gardeners. Undaunted I continued and over the rest of that season I realised that I'd found what I wanted to do.

In common with many others, horticulture is

my second career. When I left school gardening as a job was not something I considered, mainly because it was never suggested to me or promoted at all and I was not aware of the training and apprenticeship opportunities available at large gardens such as RBG, Kew or RHS Wisley. I hope that these career opportunities are more accessible to young people today but sadly I think we still have a long way to go in raising awareness of the value of horticulture in our society.

I joined the course at Shuttleworth, achieving RHS Level 2 in 2006 and studied for another two years to complete RHS Level 3 in 2008. During this time, I left the bank and Knebworth Park to work for my current employer as second gardener in a large private garden in Hertfordshire. Over

the last 12 years I increased my hours to full-time, working extra hours and helping with the re-development of the gardens at a larger estate also owned by my employer. I am now back in Hertfordshire full-time as Head Gardener.

Master of Horticulture

I've continually looked for opportunities to further my formal horticultural education but not found the right course to fit in with full-time work until I read about the Master of Horticulture, offered by the RHS.

It is a degree level award open to professionals within the industry who already have some years of experience and are qualified to a certain level. The course is completed over three to five years





Far left: Yew topiary and herbaceous borders in the garden where I currently work in Hertfordshire.

Middle left and left: The branch visit to Fullers Mill in Suffolk, owned and run by gardeners' charity Perennial, was of great help in completing an assignment for the Master of Horticulture.

Below left: A visit to Delfland Nurseries in April provided a valuable opportunity to see inside the glasshouses at a production nursery.

with the first two years including units studying research and development, management skills and sustainable horticulture. During the final year students complete applied knowledge assessments and a dissertation. Upon successful completion candidates are entitled to use the designation MHort (RHS) after their name.

The course appealed to me as I was looking to expand my knowledge while still working full-time. The Master of Horticulture is a prestigious award to obtain, well regarded within the industry and it would afford me great personal and professional pride to complete it. Although I'm not looking to change my job at present, I'm aware of the fact that as I get older I may not be as happy, or able, to be out in all weathers undertaking physically demanding work. Attaining the MHort will open other options for me within horticulture in the future.

I applied to undertake the course in 2017 and was accepted. After attending a launch weekend at RHS Wisley in October I came home slightly daunted by all the new skills I needed to have to complete the MHort. Having never been to university or studied at this level before I had no idea about writing reports, academic referencing or how to go about in-depth research so I had a steep learning curve ahead of me.

As I turned my attention to getting the first assignment underway, I also began to look at the professional bodies out there that might be of benefit and discovered the Chartered Institute of Horticulture. Student membership was free and available to me as I was studying with the RHS so I applied online and was accepted as a member in November, receiving a welcome letter from Jason Daff, then Membership Secretary for the Eastern Branch.

Eastern Branch events

I am finding the branch visits very interesting and of great help to me in completing assignments. The first visit I attended was in April when we had a chance to go to Delfland Nurseries and Chapel Cottage Plants to look behind the scenes at the

greenhouses and production areas of these two different producers. Delfland specialise in producing vegetable plants to market gardeners including organic and specialist crops such as chamomile whereas Chapel Cottage produces perennials en masse to be sold in retail outlets. These visits were of particular interest to me as my area of horticultural experience is ornamental or amenity, but an overview of production horticulture is essential to complete the MHort course. I was able to take copious notes and photographs to use for future assignments and made the acquaintance of the owners of both businesses, whom I can later contact for information if I need to.

The next visit on the calendar was to Fullers Mill Garden in Suffolk that is owned and run by the gardeners' charity Perennial. Perennial is the only charity currently providing free, confidential advice and support and financial assistance specifically to people working in or retired from the horticulture industry. This visit came at the perfect time for me as I was just embarking on Unit 3 of the MHort (Operational Management) and the first task was to write a report comparing the management of two horticultural organisations.

The organisations had to be working in the same area, with one operating for-profit and the other not-for-profit. I used the Fullers Mill garden as my not-for-profit example so being able to meet Head Gardener Annie Dellbridge in person and later corresponding with her by email was very helpful. We also had a presentation from Laura Garnett of Perennial who gave us some insight into the work undertaken by the charity. I also had a chance to speak to her personally during the day to discuss my assignment and what information she may be able to help me with. The visit was invaluable in helping me to complete my report. For the for-profit organisation I used Knebworth Park and the current Head Gardener, Martin Day, was very helpful.

In July I attended the Annual Branch Meeting which was a great opportunity to meet and talk with more members of the Eastern Branch,

getting to know a bit more about them and what areas they work in. I also found out more about how the branch is run and who does what. It was proposed I join the committee as student representative, which I was pleased to do.

At the recent branch visit to Sandringham it was good to see two fellow members of my MHort year group and have a chance to discuss how we're all getting on with the course. We had a very informative tour of the gardens with Head Gardener Martin Woods MCIHort and again I have stored up information and photographs for future use.

I look forward to meeting up with my fellow members at the next planned visit, which is to Barcham Trees in November and to touring another area I would not normally have access to.

Student membership benefits

Membership of CIH has helped me immensely in completing assignments for my RHS qualification through information collected on branch visits. I've also met many different people from diverse areas of the industry whom I otherwise would not have had the opportunity to know. I'm hoping that their knowledge and experience may be able to help me in the future.

Many people currently studying on horticultural courses are career changers the same as I am. In my opinion it is these people who would benefit the most from the student membership offered by the Chartered Institute. I also believe that the Institute would benefit from having them as members. This group of people are either already working in the industry and gaining qualifications to help them advance, or they are looking to join the diverse industry of horticulture from other professions. They could benefit by gaining knowledge to help them complete assignments and projects, as I have, they could also gain an insight into other areas of horticulture through meeting fellow members. Networking and making new contacts could lead to career development and even job opportunities. Mature students tend to be passionate about plants and horticulture and may be more willing to contribute to groups and committees as well as attending visits and talks. Younger students could have a fresh perspective to offer. They all bring diverse skills from other areas of life and their joining can only enrich the membership of CIH.

I fully intend to make the most of my own involvement with the Institute while studying and become a paid-up member on completion of my Master of Horticulture award.

Fran Suckling

Fran is Head Gardener in a large private garden in Hertfordshire. After working in finance for 22 years she began working at Knebworth Park Gardens in 2006 moving to her current location later in the same year. She completed RHS Level 2 at Shuttleworth College in 2006 and Level 3 in 2008 and is currently studying for the RHS Master of Horticulture. Fran became a student member of the Eastern Branch of the CIH in 2017 and joined the committee as student representative in June 2018.

