

New sustainable horticultural course designed to meet the needs of the industry

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Plumpton College will be launching a new foundation degree in sustainable horticultural management in September 2024. Looking to address the local and regional needs of employers, Nir Halfon, assistant curriculum manager for horticulture, developed the modules to address the skills crisis, with a particular focus on green technologies and sustainable strategies.

Approved by University of Greenwich in March, the class will consist of around 20-24 members from a diversity of sub sectors. The course is appealing to both those who may have just completed their A Levels as well as those within the industry who have horticultural knowledge but are looking to develop management, research, analysis or evaluation skills. The course can be undertaken full or part time and, as Halfon phrases it, “gives people the opportunity to bring horticulture into the future.”

Whereas traditionally a foundation course might focus on plant science and then offer other pathways, Halfon wanted to design the course to offer that diversity in the whole programme. “The modules are applicable to all those sub sectors within horticulture,” he adds.

Modules on plant and soil science will incorporate contemporary thinking around no-till, soil life, and the soil food web, while modules on new technologies will explore everything from GPS driven equipment, to drones, all the way to data analysis. “We’ll be able to say to the class, this is how this applies to somebody

working in a plant nursery, and somebody who wants to manage a big RHS garden. That's what is really unique about the course, it creates a really rich environment for people to learn."

The course is also for the industry, with Halfon having spoken to employers about exactly what it is they want. When it comes to technology, the course may be a particularly important training ground.

"When we spoke to employers, we asked what green technology they wanted to use and the first answer that came back was 'we don't know'," explains Halfon. "Nobody's going to invest £200,000 in robots when five years down the line there could be a better one for £50,000. The course allows people to find new solutions, develop new ideas, and experiment with them in order to go out into the industry with their knowledge."

Many employers also expressed that because growers, in particular, were struggling to get in seasonal workers, they were having to turn to technological solutions. So now, instead of groups of pickers, they need technicians.

"It seems to us that for many people horticulture is seen as a low skilled and low paid job. There is a lack of awareness as to the potential of the diversity of the industry, the richness of employment and opportunities. Career advisers don't speak to students in secondary school in sixth form colleges about the potential in horticulture," Halfon explains. "First and foremost we want to show people the diversity there is."

Speaking more about why career advisors don't speak more about horticulture, Halfon said: "Quite a lot of the younger people we see are not able to complete their sixth form colleges – they don't have the academic skills but they have the practical skills. At Plumpton, we get them enthusiastic about horticulture and slowly build up their ability to write a report, to do some scientific work, to identify plants. Then there are the young people who have an allotment or garden in the family and actually have a passion for horticulture already."

He adds: "There are 30 million gardeners in the UK – that's nearly half the population that loves to garden, and yet we view horticulture as a low skilled, low paid job – its potential is enormous."

Students will study at Plumpton College's Centre of Horticulture Excellence, One Garden Brighton as well as the main 800 Hectare site in Plumpton Nr Lewes, East Sussex.

Plumpton College is holding an Open Event on Saturday 17 June where visitors can find out even more about the course.

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