



Case Study - Debi Holland

I completed the theory-based RHS Level 2 Principles of Horticulture in June 2016 and have been running my own gardening business in North Somerset for three years.

I was faced with a change of career after 10 years working at the University of Bath.

Out-of-the-blue my name came up for a local allotment and this was the catalyst that changed my life and set me on this new path. I spent every waking moment at my 75m² plot.

I had never previously considered horticulture as a career in which to earn a living, it had always been a relaxing hobby. For years our own back garden was a meticulously planted kitchen garden.

I have grown up surrounded by gardening mentors. My parents are dedicated gardeners, grandparents (and in-law), uncle/auntie and cousins all farmers and I have many inspirational gardening friends. Growing is in my blood!

I quickly realised it was essential to get a solid horticultural education so put my name down for the next available course.



In the meantime I sought 'hands-on' professional experience by applying to be a volunteer Harvester at the walled kitchen garden at Tyntesfield National Trust property; working with their horticultural team harvesting fruit, vegetables and flowers for the Cow Barn restaurant and the visitor's honesty table.



At the same time I started up my own gardening business; initially kicked-started by kind family friends who gave me the opportunity to 'cut my teeth' on their gardens and learn the ropes. My business quickly took off via referrals. My client list escalated rapidly and I was soon working flat out five days a week with a waiting list.

Being a female gardener proved to be a real advantage as initially a large percentage of my clients were ladies and they felt more comfortable hiring a woman. Gardening can be an incredibly friendly social job – many friendships made!

September 2015 I arrived at the packed Linnaeus Room, Bristol Botanic Gardens with trepidation and excitement in equal measures.

I came to the course with a strong horticultural knowledge but was surprised how extensive each of the eight subjects were. It really tested your ability to absorb and retain facts. You need to do a significant amount of home study, particularly around exam time to fully embrace each subject.

I highly recommend printing off all the past papers and working through them. Familiarise yourself with the way questions are asked, what information achieves marks and complete in the time limit. Past papers are available online at www.rhs.org.uk

Each unit was taught by a different tutor. I found this refreshing as everyone had different teaching styles, all experts in their field so you had a wealth of knowledge and experience to draw upon.

There was a cross-section of people taking the course from gardening professionals seeking to formalise their knowledge, to career changers and hobby gardeners. Whatever your reasons for signing up, all you need is passion, enthusiasm and a willingness to learn.

Each week 10 plants were chosen from the Botanic Gardens and displayed in class with their full botanical name. These were to be learnt for an informal test the following week where Latin and plant origins were discussed alongside plant characteristics, growing conditions and planting styles.

I was concerned about managing to learn vast numbers of botanical names, let alone spell them correctly which is a requisite for the exams but I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly I tuned into the classification system. Realising the significance of how plants are linked botanically - Latin became second nature.

The staff and tutors at Bristol Botanic Gardens were immensely helpful and always on hand to answer queries via email.

It was a huge commitment to embark on this course but if you are really passionate about plants, learning and improving your horticulture knowledge, then achieving these foundations ensures you have attained a level of knowledge that is a recognisable benchmark within the industry.

Juggling this intensive course, having a young son, running my own gardening business and studying the RHS Level 2 Practical course at Cannington all at the same time was very challenging (and felt like madness at times!) but so rewarding. I found that all these elements complimented and reinforced each other. Skills and knowledge crossed over from theoretical examples to practicalities in the garden whilst working.

Whether self-employed or employed, the qualification adds weight to your credentials as a gardener. If you have your own business then you can be confident that you are practicing correctly and to the high RHS standards.

I work at some incredible estates, organic farms, NGS and private gardens with gardeners, designers and farmers. They all need solid plant knowledge and skills; many specifically hiring me as they require a qualified horticulturalist.



The course has helped me to understand the scientific processes of why I am doing tasks for example picking up black spot rose leaves from the soil to break the fungal life cycle or rescuing waterlogged plants from pots; there is only so long a plant can anaerobically respire before it gives up the ghost.

The mantra for a successful garden is right plant right place!

I am so proud to have passed both the Principles and Practical Horticulture certificates, achieved commendations and qualified with a RHS Level 2 Diploma in Horticulture. This has opened up a plethora of opportunities and new directions of specialist study such as propagation.



I studied Art & Design at Hastings College of Arts & Technology and graduated with a Media degree specialising in documentary making from the University of the West of England.

My camera is integral to my work. Gardens and plants have fuelled my passion for photography and helped log daily developments in client's gardens and reflect upon past seasons. Gardening and art go hand-in-hand. My past studies have been tremendously beneficial in designing borders and colour schemes.

At the beginning of 2017 I decided to hire a designer to brand my business. Working closely with Bristol-based illustrator Carys-ink.com she used inspiration from seed heads and plants I had grown, collected or carved into lino prints. I was thrilled with the result.



Moving forward using the new branding I created my website www.debihollandgardening.com

You can also find me on Twitter [@DHgardening](https://twitter.com/DHgardening) and Instagram [@dhgardening](https://www.instagram.com/dhgardening)