
A Career at Last®

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THE EARLY YEARS

A career in horticulture had never been a consideration until I was in my mid-thirties and even then it just evolved, rather than being part of some predetermined plan.

For as long as I can remember I have had an interest in plants. One of my earliest memories and first attempts at propagation was germinating and growing a broad bean in a jar, from there I progressed to mustard and cress which was even better as this could be eaten a few days after sowing.

Also, as a child I remember eagerly awaiting the new seed catalogue each autumn, looking through the pages of perfect vegetables and all those colourful flowers that could be yours for the price of a packet of seeds. Through those years of growing up I was never happier than when I was 'helping' my Father on his allotment.

At school there was absolutely no reference to horticulture as a possible career. Rural studies, where pupils were allowed into the greenhouse, was only for those who were less able, such was the image horticulture portrayed.

I opted for a career in catering and left school at 16 years, with five O-Levels, to go to the local technical college where I studied for 2 years and gained City and Guilds and Hotel and Catering Institute qualifications. I was going on to further studies, but love took a hand and I married 3 months after leaving College. I found employment as cook in a staff restaurant, which lasted for 2 years until our son was born and that was the end of my first career.

Being a wife and mother dominated the next few years and I took a job as an evening shelf-filler in a supermarket. When my son started school I was able to transfer to day shifts and I progressed to being in charge of stock control and ordering for the store. While I quite enjoyed my job, after 12 years I knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my working life there. I now had the chance to do something different, but what?

HORTICULTURE AS A CAREER

During this period we had moved house several times, each time to a property with a larger garden. The penultimate property had a reasonable amount of garden for a

modern estate house but after a couple of years we were bored and needed a challenge — we both wanted more garden and the only way we could afford this was to buy an older property. So it was in December 1981, we moved into a very run-down bungalow standing in about a quarter of an acre. We had certainly found our challenge.

The turning point really came when I joined the local Women's Institute (WI) and found they were running gardening courses in conjunction with Pershore College of Horticulture. I thoroughly enjoyed these and wanted to learn more so then embarked on the Royal Horticultural Society General Certificate, through a correspondence course. Also through the WI, I had become involved with WI Markets, where members of the Marketing Society, both male and female, can sell home-produced goods. This started off as a good way to dispose of excess plants and garden produce but soon I was growing to sell.

It was during this time I began experiencing back problems, which resulted in a spinal operation in October 1987. This I felt was the end of any possible career.

I still wanted to learn more techniques for growing and a couple of years later went back to Pershore College for a block release course in Nursery Practice. I thought my future was set, I could continue to produce plants at home. Part of the garden had been turned into a nursery area with a tunnel, two small greenhouses and standing down space and I would sell through the WI markets and plant fairs.

TURNING PROFESSIONAL

One Friday afternoon in February 1992 a telephone call from the senior nursery lecturer at Pershore College completely changed my life. He asked if I would like a part-time job as propagator on the college nursery. It was for just 20 h a week and I thought I could easily fit it in with my own growing. I think it was only that 1st week that I did the set hours, it soon increased to 30 h and by the ripe age of 44 I had got my first full-time job.

I spent just over 3 years as propagator on the main nursery unit, until I was persuaded to take over the running of the Specialist Plant Unit (SPU) where a much wider range of plants is grown. This unit was started in the early 1990s at a time when the nursery had to become more economically viable — to achieve this the range of plants grown was streamlined but to prevent the loss of many interesting plants the SPU was established with a supervisor and a volunteer workforce. When I took over, the unit had become rather disorganised, the person in charge had other responsibilities within the College and could not cope.

THE CHALLENGE OF MANAGEMENT

Managing a volunteer workforce is as much of a challenge as growing top quality plants. In my previous jobs, working in an organised way was essential — and my catering skills have also come in useful for the various social activities I arrange for the volunteers. Many changes have been made over the years and I have tried to make each task as easy as possible within the constraints of available finance and the working area. We now produce around 25,000 plants a year, from propagation to finished plant. I have one additional staff member who works up to 15 h a week between March and October. I have also continued with my studies, obtaining my Spraying Certificate and gaining NVQ Level 3 and the RHS Advanced Certificate.

HORTICULTURE AS A SECOND CAREER

During my years at Pershore College I have observed a change in the courses that are run and also in the ages of students attending. Far more mature students are enrolling for courses, from a wide range of previous occupations. Many of them see a career in horticulture as being less stressful — but I think this is a case for debate.

Here are three examples of mature students who have found second careers in horticulture:

- 1) Mike spent 28 years as a schoolteacher before having to retire through depression. He holds a degree in biological science and with a life-long interest in horticulture; he undertook a 2-year, part-time HNC Horticulture (Professional Gardening) course. He now works as a garden centre assistant and although not directly involved with the actual growing, he finds it rewarding to be able to offer advice and answer customer's questions.
- 2) Victoria qualified as an accountant more than 20 years ago and held the position of finance director for various companies. She felt she had got as far as she was going to with the accounting profession and with them being unwilling to appoint people to senior positions over the age of 40, Victoria left before she was pushed. As she had always enjoyed gardening she felt these were skills she could develop and would get pleasure from doing so. After a 1-year National Certificate in Commercial Horticulture Victoria now works part-time in a nursery as well as developing her own nursery and plant advice business.
- 3) Marion was a Residential Social Worker with Dr. Barnardos for over 11 years, until the home she worked in closed. She then became a Special Care Home Help for a further 2 years leaving this job because of an injury. While recovering, she visited a friend who owned a small nursery and instead of just chatting over a cup of coffee, spent the day transplanting seedlings and sticking fuchsia cuttings. She enjoyed this so much she invited herself back and stayed for a further 5 years. From there Marion enrolled on a BSc (Hons) Horticulture (Crop Management) course and now holds the position of Assistant Technical Manager in Research and Development at a large nursery.

One common thread is the dramatic cuts in salary they have all taken to work in horticulture. Is it that they can now choose lower-paid employment because, being older, their outgoings are less with mortgage paid off and children left home? If wages were higher would people of this calibre be attracted into the industry at an earlier age?

But does it really matter? With the probability of a higher retirement age it will still be possible for people entering the industry later in life to make a worthwhile contribution. They bring with them many attributes, for example they have chosen the career because of a genuine interest and have gained experience of working with and dealing with people.

For me, horticulture really did change my life for the better. I feel I am doing a worthwhile job, which has given me greater confidence and many new experiences. One of the best was the opportunity to travel to South Africa. I was based at

Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden for 3 weeks, furthering the trials work the College had been conducting, and another week looking at the nursery industry in the Johannesburg area.

I have had the chance to move further into management but declined the offer. I came into the industry because of my love of plants and I want to remain working with them. I still have ambitions, mainly to grow even more plants to a high quality and continue to improve the nursery facilities. I know I would not get the same job satisfaction working from behind a desk.

Joining the International Plant Propagators Society has been of enormous benefit, it is very easy to become totally absorbed in your own world, and the opportunity to visit other nurseries and talk to growers has been invaluable.

I would urge all employers to keep an open mind when looking for new staff. Do not automatically reject the over-forties; they have a lot to offer. Ageism has no place in horticulture.