

Horticulture in 2020

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Abstract

To close the Promoting Excellence in Horticulture Conference in October 2020, a video consisting of recorded opinion pieces was created, featuring contributions from a wide range of individuals working in horticulture. Contributors were asked to provide their perspectives and experiences on four topics that the conference convenors considered to be prominent in 2020: COVID-19, Brexit, diversity and inclusion, and plant health. We consider their contributions here.

Introduction

No one is going to forget 2020 – at least, not for a long time. We are probably all guilty of having used the word ‘unprecedented’ a lot last year and we have become familiar with words and phrases that in 2019 meant very little to anyone or simply did not exist – ‘lockdown’, ‘furloughed’ and ‘COVID secure’ among many others. Everyone has been affected, including horticulturists and their colleagues working in public gardens. It has affected how we garden, the work we have been able to undertake, the financing of our gardens, the training of new horticulturists and what we have been able to show to visitors. It has indeed been unprecedented.

Back in 2019, *Sibbaldia*, along with PlantNetwork and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE), organised the Promoting Excellence in Horticulture Conference, which sought to engage professional horticulturists working in public and private gardens in a conversation on what makes good horticulture and what good horticulture seeks to achieve. The conference was timed to celebrate RBGE’s 350th anniversary in 2020.

Global events overtook us, however, and we had to move it online: it was far too important a conversation to simply cancel. The move online, while preventing those serendipitous conversations in the coffee queue, did give us an opportunity to explore new and emerging issues that are having an impact on the horticultural world in a new digital format: filmed opinion pieces.

As it had been an unprecedented year, we decided to look at what we thought were the four main horticultural issues of 2020: COVID-19, Brexit, diversity and inclusion, and plant health. Of course, we could have included many other issues, such as climate change, but we felt that these four really stood out as ‘new’ or needing more focused attention and discussion. Plant health could be argued to be a long-standing prominent issue; however, 2020 was also the designated International Year of Plant Health and so it was worthy of inclusion on that basis alone. We approached a number of different people and organisations to ask for their perspectives and opinions on these issues – and many were very willing to

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share their experiences. The conference then showcased these experiences in an effort to stimulate discussion and raise awareness of the far-reaching consequences of these four issues.

COVID-19

Throughout the pandemic, PlantNetwork has been asking members for their feedback – what was happening in their gardens, how it was affecting the garden teams, what they were doing differently and so on (PlantNetwork, 2020a). Gardens have been impacted in different ways – smaller and/or independent gardens were able to adapt by changing their focus, such as moving from ornamental to more edible growing, or simply continuing to work, but with no visitors during much of lockdown. Others had to change how they operate in the short term, with fewer staff and altered objectives for 2020. Some have experienced an increase in visitor numbers as the public have searched for new places to visit and an opportunity to explore greenspace. The remaining gardens, particularly those reliant on visitors and associated sales, have been severely impacted, losing significant income, which has led to staff redundancies, and suffering disruption to garden (and business) development for the next few years. The contributors to the COVID-19 section reflected on this spectrum of experiences and how they had been affected. One contributor talked about the garden centre sector, which started lockdown in a very negative place but has demonstrated recovery and even growth in 2020. While it has generally been a tough year for all and there is still considerable uncertainty, even for those able to adapt quickly to COVID measures and frequently reduced visitor numbers, a positive message was communicated that there might be

opportunities that will result from the drastic changes in working practices or garden management: gardeners can adapt, learn from the experience and even build on the considerable interest in gardens and growing that lockdown has stimulated.

Brexit

Since the conference in October 2020, the UK has fully transitioned out of the European Union – and yet many of the issues flagged by the two contributors to the Brexit discussion are still to be fully understood. Horticulture is a significant contributor to the UK economy, through both garden tourism and commercial horticulture. Issues relating to the import (and export) of plants, plant material and even non-living horticultural supplies from the EU continue to be problematic, with many uncertainties and ongoing confusion existing around the regulations and requirements for import: some suppliers have already stopped exporting to the UK due to this. The consequences for horticultural staff as well as for garden visitors coming from the EU have yet to be realised, as they are currently masked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The contributors highlighted the considerable uncertainty that has come with Brexit, such as changing regulations, unclear inspection requirements for imported plants and escalating costs, warning that there will definitely be negative consequences for the supply of horticultural products. They did also indicate that there might be positives to be gained, such as more opportunities for British growers, but these seem largely overshadowed at the moment. The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA), one of the key contributors to this session, has created a step-by-step guide for growers moving plants between the EU, Northern Ireland and Great Britain (HTA, 2020).

Equality, diversity and inclusion

The death of George Floyd in the USA in May 2020 triggered a global response which reached the UK horticultural industry (Appleby, 2020). Horticulture is a universal interest that transcends issues of gender, sexuality, different abilities, age and, of course, ethnicity. So why professional horticulture is not as ethnically diverse as other sectors, including community horticulture, and why it does not reflect wider UK society are questions that require further investigation. There is a need to ensure that horticulture is as equal, diverse and inclusive as possible. Contributors stressed the importance of making gardens accessible to as many groups as possible, and looked at issues such as language (the words used as well as the language in which they are provided), the portrayal of garden visitors and staff in photographs and videos, the need to involve marginalised groups in advisory roles to ensure gardens are open and accessible to all, and how to increase diversity at all career stages, including in leadership roles. Contributions from horticulturists and people in associated roles already working in gardens also highlighted some of the positive steps already being taken, but the need to do more was acknowledged. Making gardens more welcoming to visitors from diverse backgrounds will also encourage a greater diversity in professional horticulture, as visiting gardens is often the first step to entering the industry.

Plant health

The United Nations declared 2020 to be the International Year of Plant Health to raise awareness of the links between plant health,

nutrition and hunger, poverty, environmental protection and economic development (FAO, 2019). That this International Year coincided with a human pandemic might have served both to increase the profile of diseases, particularly in the developed world where prevention of communicable disease has often been taken for granted, and to dilute or hinder the plant health message. The contributors captured the key messages of the importance of plant health in the UK – the threats posed from newly emerging or newly introduced pests and diseases, the need for constant vigilance and control of plant material movements, the usefulness of quarantine and biosecurity messages, and the possible consequences should a virulent new pest or disease take hold in the UK, as seen with ash dieback. The consequences for our gardens might be small compared to those for the wider environment and food security. An important point to emerge was that whilst professional horticulturists might be aware of these issues, it is equally important to be aware of the measures to restrict or prevent pest and disease transmission and apply these measures in full in our own gardens (Hayden, 2020) as well as communicate them to visitors and encourage them to implement them in their gardens and general practices.

Afterword

The recording of the session is available on the PlantNetwork website (PlantNetwork, 2020b) and from this volume of *Sibbaldia* online (<https://doi.org/10.24823/Sibbaldia.2021.386>). Please do listen to the perspectives offered and share your experiences with us.

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