

NEWS ARTICLE

College glasshouses aim to inspire next generation of horticulturalists

The new facility opening at Pershore College in Worcestershire

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This autumn the horticulture industry will witness the much-anticipated opening of two ultra-modern teaching facilities – Reaseheath College’s £8m National Centre for Food Futures and the Environment and Pershore College’s Collections House, which forms part of Pershore’s larger, £5.8m redevelopment. Produce Business UK assesses how these new learning resources will help address the sector’s skills shortage – and how fresh produce buyers can lend their support.

The fact that each year crowds of tourists flock to the glasshouses at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew perhaps highlights just how intoxicating it is to be surrounded by breathtaking flora and fauna.

And so, when prospective horticulture students step inside the new, vegetation-filled glasshouses at Pershore College in Pershore, Worcestershire, or Reaseheath College in Nantwich, Cheshire, the question on their minds will very likely be: “Why would I not want to study horticulture?”.

John Farmer, commercial manager at Pershore College, has thoughtfully sourced some statuesque Dicksonia squarrosa fern trees to take pride of place inside the college’s eight metre-high Collections House.

He explains: “We wanted the canopy to be high so it’s like walking through a rainforest. I think when people enter this space they will get a feel for what horticulture is all about.”



Attis-7 plant growth lights in the new Collections House at Pershore College



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Reaseheath College, meanwhile, has built a vast 768m² glasshouse that has been divided into four zones – one for strawberry production, another for tomato production, a third for propagating plants and, finally, an area that will be used for general growing purposes. The glasshouses are obviously going to make a lasting impression on people but, putting the “wow factor” aside, the two new developments – the finishing touches for which are currently being completed – have primarily been built to provide students with new and enhanced learning opportunities.

As Sarah Hopkinson, Reaseheath’s curriculum area manager for horticulture and floristry, explains: “The [Reaseheath’s] state-of-the-art crop production unit will provide one of the most modern glasshouse training facilities in the UK, enabling Reaseheath College to train and prepare students for the future production of intensive food and ornamental crops vital to the continuing success of the entire UK protected cropping industry.”

A turning point

Given that both facilities have been made possible thanks to government grants, the country’s leaders have evidently acknowledged horticulture’s vital role in helping to feed the UK’s growing population – and in making the UK a greener, more sustainable place to live. Yet as many fresh produce buyers will know, the industry has for many years suffered from a national skills shortage.

Fortunately, these two new facilities aim to help resolve this pressing issue by attracting new students to the profession – and by giving existing students the opportunity to learn all aspects of this varied sector.

They are also enabling the colleges to create new courses that have been specifically designed to meet the industry’s needs. Reaseheath College has, for instance, just developed a new BSc in Horticultural Science and Production Technology.

Hopkinson says: “This programme applies scientific knowledge to the propagation and commercial production of a range of plants, including field-grown and protected food crops, ornamental and hardy nursery stock.

“The course prepares graduates for a broad range of careers in commercial production horticulture as well as developing [the] business and entrepreneurial skills required for those wishing to establish new horticultural businesses and ventures.”

The new BSc programme at Reaseheath also includes vocational training in PA1, PA6, First Aid and Health and Safety since these were all identified by the industry as necessary requirements of graduates.

Pershore College, meanwhile, is due to launch several new courses next year (2016), including a BSc in Production Horticulture. And, as well as degrees, both facilities will be utilised by what the colleges hope will be an increasing number of students attaining Level 2 and Level 3 diplomas in horticulture – as well as an increasing number of students working with local businesses to complete apprenticeships.

Reaseheath College will in February (2016) launch a new, 20-month-long Level 2 work-based diploma in production horticulture that will run in conjunction with UK retailer Sainsbury’s. The course will allow apprentices to gain an insight into all aspects of food production.

Meanwhile, Pershore College is now part of one of the UK’s 11 Food Enterprise Zones that are receiving government funding to help promote food production. The scheme is therefore expected to see the college further strengthen its links with local growers to develop new apprenticeships.



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Inspiring the younger generation

The horticulture teams at both Pershore and Reaseheath also intend to showcase their new facilities to school pupils in a bid to address the age-old problem of young people not fully understanding exactly what horticulture is.

"It's difficult to get people to know what horticulture is – to get them to understand the breadth of it and just how scientific it is," notes Farmer.

Given that Pershore's new development includes a "robotics" room dedicated to building machines such as drones used for monitoring crops, pupils may well be surprised at just technical the industry has become.



Duncan Adams, Pershore's group director for marketing, communications and student recruitment, hopes the new building – which also boasts a state-of-the-art living wall – will inspire young people, "to enable kids to carry out science experiments with us, and look at the living wild and the drones".

Hopkinson also hopes that Reaseheath's new facility will inspire the next generation of horticulturalists – and change perceptions about what a career in horticulture is truly about. "Schools could use our facility to help to make the link between the content of the National Curriculum (such as plant science at GCSE and 'A' level) and the application to commercial production and the industry," she says.

"I think the promotion of our facilities starts with a need to promote careers in horticulture in general. It is a great industry to be part of but many school leavers don't consider a career in horticulture because they think horticulture is the same as gardening. And careers advisors within schools also don't know about the range of career opportunities."

A helping hand from the industry

Both colleges are clearly doing their utmost to address horticulture's national skills shortage and entice more people into the profession, but they cannot do it alone. They are therefore calling on growers and buyers to lend further support.

"It would be great if buyers and growers could promote the need for 'hands-on' training in a facility like ours to ensure that UK horticulture production remains competitive and responds to the need to produce more food as sustainably as possible," Hopkinson notes.

Adams adds that Pershore is very keen to work in partnership with businesses and employees. "We are open to different ideas and different ways of working," he says. "The industry needs to be brave – to come and talk to the colleges about supporting them with apprenticeships. I think a lot of the industry is nervous about the impact it will have on their businesses but, actually, those who have done it are testament to the fact that that if you invest in apprentices they stay with you for longer and provide you with great employees." There's still a real demand for apprenticeships, according to Adams, particularly since there's still government funding available. "It's an area for growth," he points out. "I think it's because the parents are hearing a lot about apprenticeships. There's a lot of interest."

Clearly, these are exciting times for horticulture education but the industry as a whole certainly has a part to play in keeping the momentum going.

