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William learning about the magnolias at Caerhays with Charles Williams.

Gardeners in training

William Stanger

I am in my third and final year of a Professional Gardeners Guild (PGG) traineeship, currently working at the Garden House which takes two trainees every year at the end of August; education is one of the main aims of the Garden House Charitable Trust and PGG trainees are significant in fulfilling it.

My other placements were the Savill Garden and Thenford Arboretum. Before the traineeship I had spent four years at Writtle College gaining an MA in Historic Designed Landscapes and a BSc Hons 1st Class in Green Space Management. My fellow trainee, Brad Bingham, spent a year at RHS Harlow Carr completing the RHS Level 3 course, and he also has a City and Guilds Extended Diploma in Horticulture. Both our positions at the Garden House are sponsored: Brad is funded by the Finnis Scott Foundation and I am funded by the Heath Scholarship¹.

I would also like to add my thanks to RHS Bursaries, the Studley College Trust and the Mary Dale Legacy for funding the seminar, study tour in Portugal, practical qualifications, and relocation costs between gardens.

The PGG takes care of the administration of the scheme, the selection of trainees, and placing students at their host garden. The interview panel look for potential trainees with at least a year's experience, be it paid or voluntary, and generally an RHS Level 2 certificate or equivalent; this ensures that the gardens have at the very least competent people.

John Humphris, PGG President, ensures that all 18 PGG trainees get the broadest experience possible, achieved by choosing three contrasting gardens for each student: one might be a private garden with a small team; another could be part of a large organisation and open to the public; some will have volunteers; and then there

are the types of garden – such as botanic and/or historic – and the climatic and soil conditions which dictate the plants grown. The diverse gardens include Chatsworth, Buckingham Palace and the National Botanic Garden of Wales.

Each trainee is expected to keep a daily diary and write an annual report. Towards the end of the three years, trainees write a dissertation highlighting the problems of managing a garden and proposing possible solutions. Each year trainees attend a seminar at Dunford House, Midhurst. Students from schemes such as the Historic and Botanic Garden Trainee Programmes also attend. In total there were 35 trainees at the last seminar in October. The seminar provides garden visits, lectures, and an opportunity for students to meet each other. This year Malcolm Pharoah gave a lecture about his time in New Zealand, and he has been advising me on my own trip.

¹The Heath Scholarship was established in 2002 by Mrs Harris in memory of her parents. It has funded one of the two garden trainees each year at the Garden House, always a PGG trainee.

Second-year trainees also have a week's study tour/ work experience to Parques de Sintra in Portugal.

Trainees are funded to undertake additional training to obtain a spraying licence (PA6) and chainsaw licence (CS30/31). We two make up a third of the paid gardening team at the Garden House, which has greatly benefited from having trainees with these qualifications, ensuring that a lot of work can be done in-house rather than hiring contractors. A lot of the tree work is done over the winter when the garden is closed to the public.

We are highly fortunate at the Garden House that retired gardener David Miles holds weekly tutorials including plant identification and workshops on pruning and

propagation, training which host gardens are not obliged to provide. David is particularly strict when it comes to the plant-identification tests:

not only are we expected to identify the plants correctly, we have to get the spelling and punctuation right. We also get to use a wide range of machinery including tractors, hedge trimmers and mowers. Foreman David Milburn patiently goes through how to operate each piece of machinery before unleashing us into the garden. We also have the chance to ask Head Gardener Nick Haworth and the rest of the team questions – they are very generous in taking time to explain things and give us a thorough understanding. We are kept busy with a long to-do list: during the early part of the

year we moved a hundred tons of compost to mulch the garden, and resurfaced a quarter of the gravel paths.

The Garden House offers a great training ground, encompassing many different areas with different styles of design and growing conditions. In the walled garden you can see more-traditional herbaceous and mixed borders, whereas the summer garden is more contemporary and naturalistic. Add to these woodland areas, a cottage garden, a bulb meadow and an arboretum and you have one of the most diverse gardens in the country. Not only do we learn about how to cultivate the plants in these different habitats, but also how to put them together artistically and extend the season of interest.

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Trainees and volunteers planting dahlias at the Garden House. William at the wheelbarrow.

One technique is to plant annuals such as *Cosmos bipinnatus* to follow on from early-flowering perennials such as *Paeonia mairii*. I have also noticed that repeating the same plant in an area creates a more cohesive and rhythmic effect, such as *Dahlia coccinea* var. *palmeri* dotted throughout twin borders.

The Savill Garden at Windsor, like the Garden House, offers a fantastic opportunity for trainees to improve their plant knowledge. Areas include a bog garden, dry garden and rose garden. The Deputy Keeper of the Gardens, Harvey Stephens, often walked us around the gardens pointing out key plants of interest. We also had propagation workshops including grafting and seed sowing. The Savill and Valley Gardens are blessed with an incredibly diverse plant collection including nine national collections.

At Windsor I was given the amazing opportunity to help with exhibiting at the Rhododendron Shows at Wisley, including the Centenary Show. We did very well that year, coming away with a trophy from every class we entered. More recently I have visited Caerhays gardens and was given a tour of their national collection of magnolias by Charles Williams. It's been a huge advantage to see and work with numerous different types of rhododendron and magnolias in the same place, to compare like with like, and to speak to the knowledgeable people who grow them. Yesterday I was



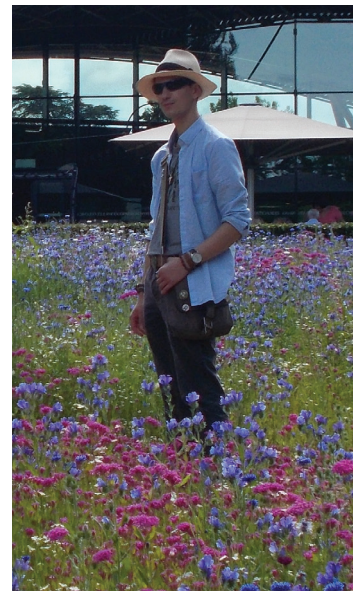
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The Crown Estate, Windsor – represented by Patricia Lynch, Harvey Stephens and William Stanger – won the new Centenary Cup for best exhibit, a spray of *Rhododendron schippenbachii*, at the Rhododendron Group Centenary Show 2016.

shadowing the judging at the Rhododendron Show at RHS Rosemoor and realised how difficult it is to decide who gets first, second and third prizes out of 25 entries.

There are some great opportunities to supplement a trainee's education. The talks and garden visits put on by groups such as the Hardy Plant Society and Plant Heritage have been of immense value.

At the end of August 2017, Brad and I will be moving on. Brad has two more placements to complete, the next at Ashridge House. I had wanted to visit New Zealand for several years, and having national collections of species rhododendrons and magnolias at my disposal prompted me to make a visit a reality. I am very grateful to the Hardy Plant Society for awarding me a Kenneth Black Bursary, which means that from mid-September until October



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In the pictorial meadow at the Savill Garden.

2018 I will be touring New Zealand. My main areas of study will be the native plants as well as New Zealand-bred magnolias and rhododendrons. I expect to find some good plants to recommend to my fellow hardy planters. 🌿