

Horticultural therapist

Job Description

Horticultural therapists work with people who are disabled or disadvantaged by age, circumstance or ability.

Social and therapeutic horticulture provides programmes that promote health and well-being. Through individually-tailored work programmes, and with caring and observant encouragement, clients develop confidence in practical and social skills.

Horticultural therapy (or therapeutic horticulture) is used in rehabilitation programmes, providing outdoor activity and physical exercise in a supportive atmosphere. Additionally, sensory stimulus gained from working with shape, form, colours and scents can give pleasure and help towards achieving positive outcomes.

The therapy can involve land use and animal husbandry.

Typical Work Activities

Horticultural therapists work with small groups of people, or with individuals on a one-to-one basis.

Typical work activities include:

- liaising with external statutory and voluntary services to provide a multidisciplinary, person-centred approach;
- using assessment methods in order to record, monitor and evaluate individual achievements, which may include making initial assessments, planning daily tasks and supporting individuals often using a diary system;
- carrying out regular one-to-one appraisals, updates and reviews;
- maintaining daily records, including job sheets, time sheets and individual portfolios of evidence of work;
- advising on equipment and techniques for older people and people with mobility or sensory impairments;
- designing and implementing horticultural programmes for people of all ages with disabilities;
- ensuring activities match the content of nationally recognised awards;
- planning each day's work with individuals;
- setting tasks according to the physical and mental needs/abilities of individuals;
- teaching individuals horticultural tasks such as sowing seeds, setting out plants, moving compost bags, planting out, lawn mowing, soil preparation and pruning;
- demonstrating the use of tools and materials to ensure they are used safely;
- helping individuals record their tasks by writing simple summaries or drawing pictures;
- helping individuals to develop confidence and self-esteem through their work;
- assisting individuals to improve their social and practical horticulture skills;
- encouraging individuals to gain pleasure from land use;
- closely observing individuals to monitor their progress;
- assessing the effectiveness of individual programmes;
- adjusting activities to make them more effective;
- taking part in discussions with other professionals, such as social workers and psychologists;
- carrying out research on the effectiveness of horticultural therapy, often in cooperation with academics;
- programming and monitoring budgets;
- promoting easier gardening and horticulture to the general public.

Work Conditions

- Range of typical starting salaries: £17,000 - £25,000 (salary data collected Jan 09).
- Range of typical salaries at senior level/with experience (e.g. after 10 - 15 years in the role): £22,000 - £30,000 (salary data collected Jan 09).
- Salaries can vary between employers and sectors.
- There are no national scales and typically no fringe benefits.
- Working hours often include regular extra hours. Some weekend or evening work may be expected.
- Therapists work mainly in gardens and associated outbuildings.
- Men are currently underrepresented in the occupation, but organisations welcome applications from all applicants to ensure diversity in their workforce.
- Self-employment/freelance work is sometimes possible but is generally limited. Part-time work and career breaks are also possible.
- Vacancies are limited but potentially available in most areas of the country. Opportunities abroad are rare apart from in the US where horticultural therapy is established in most states. Limited openings may exist in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.
- The dress code is generally informal as you need to work outdoors. The role usually forms part of a multidisciplinary caring team. The work can be emotionally stressful. Budgets are frequently limited, and goals can be difficult to achieve.
- Travel within a working day is occasional. Absence from home at night is uncommon.

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Entry Requirements

Although this area of work is open to all graduates/Diplomates, the following degree/HND subjects may increase your chances:

- horticulture;
- education;
- landscape architecture/design;
- botany/plant science;
- occupational therapy or psychology;
- social work.

Entry without a degree or HND is often possible.

Horticultural therapy is usually taken up as a second career. Entrants often have experience in social work, teaching, occupational therapy or nursing. Others may have a background in a horticulture discipline or extensive voluntary experience in horticultural activities.

Coventry University offers a certificate course (part-time) in therapeutic horticulture. This is suitable for students with both little or no background in horticulture or therapy. The national charity Thrive (www.thrive.org.uk), in conjunction with Coventry University and Warwickshire College, has developed the first nationally recognised diploma award - the Professional Development Diploma in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (part-time, distance learning course). This is aimed at those with qualifications in either therapy or horticulture and provides the opportunity to develop the appropriate missing skills. Askham Bryan College also offers a Professional Development Diploma in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture. Finally, University of Reading offers a BSc course in Horticulture and Environment Management as well as an MSc in Horticulture which includes a module in horticultural therapy. There is the option to specialise in social and therapeutic horticulture.

A pre-entry postgraduate qualification is not essential.

Candidates need to show evidence of the following:

- patience, understanding, tolerance and the ability to work with people whose behaviour can be unusual;
- a strong interest in horticulture;
- communication skills and a sense of humour;
- the ability to train people in various skills.

Therapists also need to be very observant and able to motivate, encourage, and recognise when to give praise for small advances. A high level of independence is also required.

It is advisable to build up work experience with children or adults in caring situations. If you do not have a horticultural qualification, voluntary work in special schools or hospitals with a therapist may help. Advertised posts almost always require horticultural experience and a recognised qualification, such as a national certificate in horticulture, NVQs/SVQs, or a degree/foundation degree. Competition for jobs is high and few posts are advertised.

It is illegal for employers to discriminate against candidates on the grounds of age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation or religious faith. For more information on equality and diversity in the job market see Handling Discrimination (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination).

Training

The extent and quality of training will largely depend on the employing organisation. Most training is on the job according to the needs of the individual.

Thrive (www.thrive.org.uk) offers short and accredited courses at different levels which are suitable for those recently employed, newly qualified in horticulture or with many years of experience/knowledge. Courses run in the past have included:

- willow weaving and sculpture;
- sensory gardening;
- horticulture skills.

Thrive training also includes introductory days to social and therapeutic horticulture for those new to the subject or with basic knowledge as well as advanced level courses for previous attendees or those with more extensive horticultural knowledge.

Commencing in September each year, the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) (www.rhs.org.uk) offers programmes of training, including the Wisley Diploma in Practical Horticulture (WDPH). This is a two-year course of paid work experience and academic study which leads to the RHS Diploma in Horticulture. Applicants will normally be expected to hold a National Certificate in Horticulture, an RHS General Examination in Horticulture Certificate or similar. This is usually attained via day-release classes at horticultural college. Work experience is gained through paid employment within RHS gardens. RHS also offers the One Year Specialist Option Certificate which is a 12-month programme of paid work experience offered in six different disciplines.

Career Development

Initial promotion may be to supervisory positions, which may require moving to a different employer. There may also be opportunities for therapists to become involved in research projects alongside their therapeutic work.

To improve your chances of promotion, you could work towards horticultural qualifications such as the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) (www.rhs.org.uk) Diploma in Horticulture, which is necessary for associate membership of the Institute of Horticulture (IoH) (www.horticulture.org.uk). It is open to junior professionals in horticulture and dedicated amateur gardeners. Candidates are examined in practical and applied horticultural knowledge, so a period of broad horticultural experience is useful. For those wishing to proceed to the RHS Master of Horticulture award, MHort (RHS), it is essential.

The MHort (RHS), along with three years' post-study experience, is recognised for corporate membership of the Institute of Horticulture (IoH) (www.horticulture.org.uk). The qualification is one of the highest that can be achieved in the profession and tests horticultural knowledge, understanding and practical skills. Registration is open to holders of the Society's (level 3) Diploma in Horticulture or an equivalent qualification aligned with appropriate professional horticultural experience. Assessments consist of traditional written papers, projects, critiques, practical assessments and a dissertation. The MHort (RHS) will be made only to candidates who, in addition to reaching pass standard within the prescribed modules, have spent a minimum of three years in acceptable full-time horticultural employment. The qualification normally takes three years of personal study to complete.

Typical Employers

Horticultural therapy is developing in the UK, with the national charity, Thrive (www.thrive.org.uk), at the forefront of its development. Thrive is the largest employer of horticultural therapists, employing about 20 therapists as well as horticultural coordinators who work on one of their four gardens around the UK: Reading, Battersea, Hackney and Coventry. Other charities involved in this field include Bridewell Organic Gardens (www.bridewellorganicgardens.co.uk/), Cultivations (www.cultivations.co.uk/), Growability (www.growability.org.uk/), Growing Matters Garden Centre (www.growingmatters.co.uk/) and Root & Branch (www.rootandbranch.info/).

Potentially, you may find work in:

- hospitals;
- day, adult and social education centres;
- specialist colleges for those who are physically disabled or hard of hearing;
- residential homes and centres run by social services;
- health authorities;
- charities;
- prisons;
- schools;
- parks;
- demonstration or community gardens and city farms;
- specialist nurseries.

Some further education colleges have very large special needs departments with many students undertaking horticulture qualifications.

Though not widespread, some horticultural therapists become self-employed freelance therapists. Currently, however, opportunities for working in this way are likely to be extremely limited.

There may be some opportunities for employment overseas. In the USA, horticultural therapy is well established in most states. In other countries, especially Australia and Canada, this career is developing, and there may be some opportunities in Japan. Thrive (www.thrive.org.uk) can provide useful addresses and links.

Sources of Vacancies

- Horticulture Week (www.hortweek.com);
- Grow (www.growcareers.info/);
- Opportunities: The Public Sector Recruitment Weekly (www.opportunities.co.uk);
- Community Care (www.communitycare.co.uk);
- The Guardian (www.guardian.co.uk) (Wednesdays);
- local newspapers.

Recruitment agencies rarely handle vacancies. Be aware that relevant job advertisements often use a variety of other titles, such as 'technical instructor' or 'project worker for an horticultural project'.

Related Occupations

- Horticultural consultant
- Landscape architect
- Nutritional therapist
- Occupational therapist
- Psychotherapist
- Social worker
- Special educational needs teacher
- Sports therapist

Information Sources

Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

AGCAS Publications

[Charity and Development Work Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

[Environment and Agriculture Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

[Handling Discrimination](#), AGCAS Information Booklet

[Social Care Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

Other Publications

[Community Care](#), Reed Business Information, Weekly

The Garden, [Royal Horticultural Society \(RHS\)](#), Monthly

[The Guardian](#), Guardian Newspapers Ltd, Daily

[Horticulture Week](#), Haymarket Media Group, Weekly

[Opportunities: The Public Sector Recruitment Weekly](#), Opportunities, Weekly

Websites

Bridewell Organic Gardens, www.bridewellorganicgardens.co.uk/

Cultivations, www.cultivations.co.uk/

Grow, www.growcareers.info/

Growability, www.growability.org.uk/

Growing Matters Garden Centre, www.growingmatters.co.uk/

Horticulture Week, www.hortweek.com

Root & Branch, www.rootandbranch.info/

Addresses

American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA), 3570 East 12th Avenue, Suite 206, Denver, CO 80206, USA

Tel: +1 859 514 9177 URL: www.ahta.org

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Customer Contact Unit, Eastbury House, 30 - 34 Albert

Embankment, London SE1 7TL Tel: 08459 33 55 77 URL: www.defra.gov.uk

Disabled Living Foundation, 380-384 Harrow Road, London W9 2HU Tel: 020 7289 6111 URL: www.dlf.org.uk

Institute of Horticulture (IoH), Capel Manor College, Bullsmoor Lane, Enfield, Middlesex EN1 4RQ Tel: 01992 707025

URL: www.horticulture.org.uk

Lantra: The Sector Skills Council for the Environmental and Land-based Sector, Lantra House, Stoneleigh Park,

Coventry, Warwickshire CV8 2LG Tel: 0845 707 8007 URL: www.lantra.co.uk

Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), 80 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PE Tel: 0845 260 5000 URL: www.rhs.org.uk

Thrive, The Geoffrey Udall Centre, Beech Hill, Reading RG7 2AT Tel: 0118 988 5688 URL: www.thrive.org.uk