

Horticulturist, commercial

Job Description

Commercial horticulture is a very diverse industry, which involves growing, distributing and selling food crops and ornamental plants. Commercial growers may specialise in field crops, protected growing (for example, under glass), soft and top fruit, hardy nursery stock and cut flowers. Clients include plant and tree nurseries, supermarkets and DIY stores.

The work is increasingly complex, requiring managerial, business and IT competence, alongside scientific understanding and the traditional skills of cultivation. Ultimately, the role involves the management of horticultural enterprises and this is reflected in the variety of job titles, e.g. crop manager; production manager; propagation manager; technical team manager; and sales representatives.

Typical Work Activities

Initially, graduates will be more concerned with hands-on cultivation but, with experience, they will supervise teams of others at all stages of growing, harvesting, packing, distribution and selling. Produce is sold to the food processing industry, plants to major retailers, wholesalers and the garden trade, all of whom demand increasingly high standards of quality. In addition, the traceability of crops from seed to customer is of prime importance to the food industry these days.

Typical work activities may include:

- supervising and assisting in all stages of crop production and harvesting;
- managing pest, disease and weed control programmes, commensurate with hygiene and health standards;
- marketing and selling produce, depending on crop, season and market demand;
- analysing yields, operational costs and financial returns of horticultural operations;
- identifying technical and business problems, investigating the causes and formulating solutions;
- planning and organising trials to assess their effectiveness;
- preparing new or modified operational and business plans;
- developing new products and markets and negotiating with suppliers and buyers;
- managing produce supply chain systems and the supporting infrastructure for processing, storage and transport of produce;
- organising presentations, technical visits and demonstrations;
- ensuring that UK, European Community and international quality, hygiene, health and safety and employment standards and regulations are met;
- communicating effectively with customers, working colleagues and professional groups, both orally and in writing, through briefings, reports and presentations;
- training and instructing others and helping them to develop their professional skills and experience;
- performing essential administration, including records, budgets and accounts;
- keeping up to date in your specialist area and in developments in the whole horticultural sector;
- at management level, the work involves meeting agreed deadlines and operating within agreed budgets, so a high level of competence in project management is required.

Work Conditions

- Starting salaries for new graduates: in the garden centre/nurseries sector £12,000 - £15,000; in the produce sector £13,000 - £18,000 (salary data updated Feb 07).
- Starting salaries for more experienced entrants depend on ability and experience and can vary widely according to initial level of responsibility and degree of customer contact. In the produce sector, salaries after training can jump to over £25,000 (salary data updated Feb 07).
- Range of typical salaries at senior level/with experience (e.g. after 10-15 years in the role): £25,000 - £55,000. Horticulture Week (www.hortweek.com) career guide quotes the salary of a nursery production manager as £40,000 and a senior/general manager as £35,000. However, results taken from the Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) (www.the-hta.org.uk) 2006 Annual Salary Survey, which is weighted more towards the smaller nurseries, show the national average of a nursery manager as earning £22,762.
- A generalist 'hands-on' post is usually the first job for a new graduate. Specialisation may come later.
- Working hours and workloads vary with crop, season and the position of the employer in the supply chain but a very early start is the norm. You need to be flexible at peak times, such as before bank holidays, with long hours at harvest times. High standards of quality and quantity control are demanded and tight deadlines have to be met.
- Depending on your role, work can be outdoors in all seasons, either dirty and wet or hot and sweaty. You may also be based in chilled factory environments.
- As you progress up the career ladder, you are likely to spend more time in office-based activities - management meetings, report writing and so on.
- Self-employment, part-time work and career breaks are all commonly possible for growers.
- Whilst there is equality of opportunity for both male and female graduates, the industry at professional levels is male-dominated with only about 30% of posts filled by women.
- Jobs are available in most areas in the UK. As you would expect, many posts are in rural areas.
- Travel within a working day is frequent and may be between sites or visiting suppliers and buyers, but absence from home at night is uncommon. Overseas work or travel may occasionally be required as some producing companies have links with or own growing operations overseas.

Entry Requirements

Many of those now working in senior, professional positions, chose to enter the industry straight from school and work their way up, gaining qualifications through part-time study and in-house training. Although the opportunity to work at a basic level in horticulture is still open to all, whether a graduate, Diplomat or unqualified, it is now more common for new entrants to have a horticultural qualification. The following degree subjects may improve your chances of developing a professional career:

- horticulture;
- crop and plant science;
- agriculture;
- soil science;
- environmental science;
- food science/technology;
- commerce.

Relevant HND subjects include agricultural and horticultural sciences.

Postgraduate study is not a critical requirement, but practical experience is essential. For those seeking appointments on the commercial side, experience in retailing and/or gardening and evidence of an interest in fresh produce and plants are helpful.

In addition to the traditional practical skills of cultivation, potential candidates will need to show evidence of the following:

- a strong interest in the industry and, for many posts, a knowledge of plants;
- administration skills and IT;
- technical competence, business awareness and good communication/people skills;
- planning and negotiating skills;
- problem-solving ability.

A full driving licence can be useful and applicants should be physically fit.

Respond to advertisements as they arise in the industry's press. Do not underestimate the value of short-term contracts as these may provide a way of gaining a good range of relevant experience. Be prepared to start in posts where you get your hands dirty and then take responsibility for a workforce.

Competition is increasing due to older career changers seeking entry to the industry. Demand for graduates to train as managers and technical specialists supplying quality fresh produce appears to be growing. Competition for opportunities to work abroad in horticulture is becoming increasingly fierce and fluency in another language, especially Spanish, is helpful. A professional qualification and some post-qualification experience is more and more necessary for specialist posts within foreign governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development agencies and consultancies alike. Temporary contracts, often for professionals without dependants, are now the norm as foreign governments seek to fill vacancies from within the indigenous population.

The horticultural industry has not experienced the same difficulties as agriculture but there has been a gradual reduction in the number of vacancies advertised. Many employers will have only a small number of vacancies each year and do not recruit on a regular basis. Vacancies are advertised as they arise. Your network of personal contacts in the industry is always a valuable source of job information as many posts are filled by informal networking.

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 and how to handle discrimination see Handling Discrimination (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination).

Training

Training can vary from minimal on-the-job training to well-structured graduate training schemes, such as the Management Development Services (MDS) (www.mds-ltd.co.uk) group training scheme.

Some employers provide opportunities to take management qualifications, health and safety training, training in the use of chemicals and pesticides and, increasingly, training in the use of biological alternatives in pest and disease control.

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) (www.rhs.org.uk) provides a range of training opportunities at its gardens at Wisley in Surrey, Rosemoor in Devon, Hyde Hall in Essex and Harlow Carr in North Yorkshire. These include the Wisley Diploma in Practical Horticulture (WDPH), which lasts two years and provides paid work experience and academic study and the one-year Specialist Option Certificate (SOC), which provides paid work experience either during or after college training.

Writtle College (www.writtle.ac.uk) offers a range of postgraduate taught and research-based courses as well as work-based courses, tailored courses and continuing professional development programmes. The Horticultural Development Council (HDC) (www.hdc.org.uk/) offers two awards for postgraduate research studentships each year.

Graduates aiming to become technical consultants or senior managers in crop production should look for employers who will provide the training necessary to obtain British Agrochemical Standards Inspection Scheme (BASIS) (www.basis-reg.com) and Fertiliser Advisers Certification and Training Scheme (FACTS) (www.factsinfo.org.uk/) qualifications. BASIS is an independent organisation set up by the agricultural and horticultural industries to provide training and maintain professional standards in certain areas of relevant activity.

Career Development

Initially, graduates will probably be concerned with hands-on cultivation and maintenance tasks or routine retail and commercial tasks. With experience, they will supervise teams of others in the production, marketing or retail operations of commercial horticulture. Specialisation can come later into areas such as:

- marketing;
- commercial sales;
- retail;
- propagation;
- stock development;
- crop protection;
- teaching and training;
- research.

Ultimately, graduates will be concerned with the management and business development of commercial enterprises. Promotion will depend on your ability to develop your own skills, both practical and managerial. A portfolio containing details of successful projects will be an invaluable aid to promotion. Mobility may also be necessary.

Career progression in large organisations is likely to be from grower, to team manager, to crop manager, then on to business manager and thereafter to specialisation or into a general management post. There may also be opportunities in consultancy work or to transfer across to the amenity sector or to commercial posts in other industries, including retail and services to agriculture and horticulture.

Typical Employers

Typical employers include:

- companies growing and/or supplying fresh produce and plants to consumers. These vary in size from businesses employing just one person to large nurseries and farms. They include pick-your-own enterprises and organic farms and gardens;
- production nurseries, many of which offer training schemes covering all areas of production including propagation, container and field-grown stock;
- Management Development Services (MDS) (www.mds-ltd.co.uk) who recruit graduates for a partnership of growers, suppliers and retailers, both SMEs (small to medium-sized employers) and multinationals;
- farming and horticultural co-operatives (occasionally);
- food companies that process, package and distribute fresh and processed fruit and vegetables;
- commercial companies supplying products, equipment and services to the industry;
- the media. Opportunities with one of the industry's professional journals or with the BBC. For example, features editor/manager of a journal or horticultural researcher for a gardening programme;
- further and higher education establishments often have opportunities for trainers and lecturers in the subject;
- agencies of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), e.g. England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) (www.defra.gov.uk/erd/default.htm);
- the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) (www.adas.co.uk), now a privatised consultancy;
- the The National Trust (www.nationaltrust.org.uk).

Sources of Vacancies

- Farmers Weekly (www.fwi.co.uk);
- Blooming Good Jobs (www.bloominggoodjobs.com);
- Growing Careers (www.growing-careers.com) - a website managed by Writtle College;
- Horticulture Week (www.hortweek.com) (Thursdays);
- Horticruitment UK (www.horticruitment.com);
- MorePeople (www.morepeople.co.uk);
- ProHorticulture (www.prohorticulture.com) (you will need to register to view the jobs section);
- New Scientist (www.newscientist.com) (occasional research-based posts);
- Opportunities: The Public Sector Recruitment Weekly (www.opportunities.co.uk) - vacancies in local government;
- The National Trust (www.nationaltrust.org.uk);
- The Guardian (www.guardian.co.uk) (social work and environmental supplement, Wednesdays);
- posts for specific disciplines in relevant journals;
- local press;
- colleges and university schools of agriculture and horticulture usually have established contacts within the industry.

Related Occupations

- Agricultural consultant/adviser
- Farm manager
- Field trials officer
- Garden centre manager
- Horticultural consultant
- Horticulturist, amenity
- Landscape manager
- Research scientist (life science)
- Soil scientist

Information Sources

Bibliography

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

AGCAS Publications

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

[Handling Discrimination](#), AGCAS Information Booklet

[Options with Agriculture](#), AGCAS Options Series

[Options with Environmental Science](#), AGCAS Options Series

Other Publications

[Farmers Weekly](#), Reed Business Information, Weekly

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

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

[New Scientist](#), Reed Business Information, Weekly

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

[Scottish Farmer](#), Newsquest, Weekly

Websites

British Agrochemical Standards Inspection Scheme (BASIS), www.basis-reg.com

Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), www.bbsrc.ac.uk

Blooming Good Jobs, www.bloominggoodjobs.com

Fertiliser Advisers Certification and Training Scheme (FACTS), www.factsinfo.org.uk/

Growing Careers, www.growing-careers.com

Horticulture UK, www.horticulture.com

Horticultural Development Council (HDC), www.hdc.org.uk/

Horticultural Trades Association (HTA), www.the-hta.org.uk

Institute of Biology (IOB), www.iob.org

MorePeople, www.morepeople.co.uk

ProHorticulture, www.prohorticulture.com

England Rural Development Programme (ERDP), www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/default.htm

Writtle College, www.writtle.ac.uk

Addresses

Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS), ADAS Wolverhampton HQ, Woodthorne, Wergs Road, Wolverhampton WV6 8TQ Tel: 0845 766 0085 URL: www.adas.co.uk

Association of Applied Biologists (AAB), c/o Warwick HRI, Wellesbourne, Warwick CV35 9EF Tel: 01789 470382 URL: www.aab.org.uk/

Institute of Food Science and Technology (IFST), 5 Cambridge Court, 210 Shepherds Bush Road, London W6 7NJ Tel: 020 7603 6316 URL: www.ifst.org

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

Management Development Services (MDS), The Research Station, Great North Road, Thornhaugh, Peterborough PE8 6HJ Tel: 01780 781450 URL: www.mds-ltd.co.uk

The National Trust, PO Box 39, Warrington WA5 7WD Tel: 0844 800 1895 URL: www.nationaltrust.org.uk

Notcutts Nurseries, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 4AF Tel: 01394 383 344 URL: www.notcutts.co.uk

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

Scottish Agricultural College (SAC), King's Buildings, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JG Tel: 0131 535 4000 URL: www.sac.ac.uk

Warwick Horticultural Research International (Warwick HRI), Wellesbourne, Warwick CV35 9EF Tel: 024 7657 4455 URL: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/whri/