

Year-long student placement at Sir Harold Hillier Gardens – August 2015/16
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INTRODUCTION

After completing my Foundation degree at Myerscough College, I decided that this path was not for me, as I felt I had not had enough experience as a working gardener and that I had the knowledge behind the practical skills but had not put them into practice enough.

Straight after my first year of college, in the summer holiday time I had off, I spent a month working at Ventnor Botanic Gardens, and the year after that at RHS Wisley, in the Award of Garden Merit (AGM) Trials team, and the Fruit and Vegetable team with two weeks in each. Although this experience was worthwhile and allowed a glimpse into the practical gardening world, I was only there for a month, both of which were at the same time of year – providing just a glimpse into the life of a gardener. Specialised horticulture is great to learn, as at Wisley, but I felt I needed a more rounded approach to ornamental horticulture in general – and a whole year of not only gardening, but learning as well was just what I needed.

I looked into, and applied to, various schemes/studentships etc. that would allow me to work in a garden for a while - preferably for a year so I could gain experience for a whole season of gardening. Most of the schemes did not work out, but a few interviews later and the Hillier gardens accepted me as a student (I applied for the Historical and Botanical Garden Training Programme – HBGTP and got an interview at my first choice, but was asked if I would like to become a student instead) for as long as my money could sustain myself – this ended up being the full year. The HBGTP scheme and the garden student scheme are similar; though we reported back to different people with different projects, the practical work done was very similar as far as I know.

When applying for the HBGTP scheme you are asked to choose which gardens you would like to work at from a list that the scheme will operate at for the year. Every garden will employ slightly different practices, or completely different as the case may be, and I decided upon the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens (SHHG), for not only the practical experience they could provide – as I would work in 4 different areas learning how to take care of all these areas (as it turned out, for a year) – but also because of the botanic aspect and the appearance of the garden.

After this experience, I do feel a lot more able to cope in a garden setting; having been actually doing a lot of what I had been taught and read about with the knowledgeable staff, some of whom had been there for many years and thus had a lot of experience. As SHHG is so large, strategies have been developed to help cope with the scale of the problem - I will go into this in more depth later on. I subsequently learned skills in both very neat, small-scale work, such as in Jermyns House area, and very large-scale, almost brash work in the outlying areas, where tidiness is not so much of an issue. Although just one garden, this has given me great view of such a wide range of gardening activities, that I feel confident would be applicable in many situations - although the end result wanted may be different (e.g. pruning fruit trees to restrict size or for fruit production), SHHG teaches the why, when, how etc. of a lot of practices so we learn the right technique and why we are doing it.

THE AVERAGE WEEK FOR A HILLIER STUDENT

The average working day at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens –

7.30 – Arrive at the ‘mess’ room, look at rota and see if there are any notices, same with pigeon-holes, and messages may be pinned onto front of the entrance door – such as reviews, notices from a member of staff to the team (e.g. plastic bottles were needed in the Pond area to help overwinter *Musa*), or invitations to events

The rota has 5 columns for every day of the week, and many rows, to accommodate all the names of staff and students. Every Friday the rota is updated for the students to see where you will be the next week, the area placement being rotated every two weeks. Sometimes, when a group of certain people are required – e.g. for mule training – there will be a star by the name, with the task above, or if all the students are required – e.g. for a Plants of Current Interest walkthrough – there will be a box covering all student names on the day of the activity.

The tools are all packed in to trailers, smaller ones (red or wooden) if the mule is to be used and larger ones (green) if a tractor will be used.

9.30 – Tea-break. The workers of the specific area gather and relax from work for a while and can eat a packed lunch and chat. It lasts for 15 minutes.

12.00-1.00 – Dinner time. Students are let off for their dinner.

1.00-4.00 – Garden work. The area teams usually start heading back at about 3.30 to pack tools away and help everyone else and gather their things together. This takes us up to 4.00 when everybody leaves.

Thursday – at 1.00 we have the plant identification session, conducted by Barry. This involves us individually talking about a particular plant that has interested us through the week, with a cutting of the plant. The Identification is next and afterwards a selection of random plants picked by Barry is thrown onto the table and each student is to pick one and talk about it, with one left over for Barry to talk about. After this we return to our areas.

Friday – Finish at 3.30. Usually starting to return to the tool shed half an hour before leaving time – at 3.00.

STUDENTING

Onsite accommodation, free of charge proved very helpful. These new lodgings are based inside the main garden, behind Jermyns House and next to the newly instated RHS AGM trials field – this time trialling *Hypericum sp* and cvs. I stayed the first full year inside – it had just been established shortly before my arrival – whereas students before had to stay in Brentry House, in Brentry woodland. This three-storey house could accommodate around 12-15 people – the new bungalow can hold up to 7 people (2 double bedrooms, 1 single and 1 single convertible) although the single convertible



bedroom is rather small for two people and was decided that it was only going to be for one person after my stay, although I don't know if this has happened.

During the year-student's time there they will meet many overseas students, and a few from the UK. There were four UK students when I was there – the Historic and Botanic Garden Trainee Programme (HBGTP) trainee, the apprentice, myself and another student (now working there). The first two lived nearby, so drove in to work. The latter were from much further afield in England and required the onsite lodgings. The garden recruits students from a set number of countries for a minimum of four weeks. Countries that the gardens have contact with include Hungary, Germany, France, Japan and Spain and more (these were the nationality of students I met); a student from the USA worked with us as part of the RHS and GCA Interchange Fellowship. Working and living with these students we helped them

with their English learning – an important part of their stay (to learn gardening skills and use and improve their language skills) – and we would encourage them and make them feel comfortable.

A lot of the international students had cars with them and we would journey around together; a lot of the time we would visit gardens all over the south of England, sometimes going on group trips (Petworth House and Garden, above left) and once to the Isle of Wight with a friend (below left). We went all over the South of England, from gardens of the east such as Great Dixter, Hidcote (the Red Borders above right) and Sissinghurst (White Garden below right), to gardens of Cornwall in the west, seeing as many famous gardens we'd perhaps only read about. Many students acquired a National Trust membership because of this.

I met with a few like-minded passionate plantsmen there with whom I would go out to various garden and



nurseries, buying plant along the way. Others weren't as keen on the horticulture side and we would just enjoy outings to towns or the New Forest nearby.

Being in a new country speaking a new tongue was difficult for some and I would try to help them with it and promote confidence. They all appreciated help if ever their English faltered and I liked to talk with the less confident people to try to bring them out of their shell more and teach them new words and phrases etc.

As a student, you get to meet with many interesting people from the horticultural world and see the 'behind the scenes' of many aspects, not only the work in the garden to provide the beauty to the public, also working at the Hilliers garden centre nursery unit, setting up displays at garden/country shows, and meeting characters that help the horticultural world in one form or another - all sorts of interests could be found in amateurs; from the nearby cactus/succulent and hardy plant societies, plant collectors, plant collection holders etc. to professional, working horticulturists including propagators, gardeners working at various gardens, head gardeners, directors, plant breeders, plant selectors (looking for new plants to stock at Hilliers garden centres) and nursery owners amongst others. In the images we see Roy Lancaster (above) – a renowned horticultural authority and Alan Postill a top plant breeder, with many great and popular plants to his name, who has worked at the Hillier nurseries for over 50 years.



My time after the studentship has very much been influenced by Hilliers; my encountering of many overseas horticulturists and new friends sparked the idea of working overseas, just as they had done at Hilliers – together with the facts that a great many foreign people have learned English as a second language, and that there are a number of countries with a good horticultural base. As I learned German at school, and Germany is a very good country for horticulture, I asked around for good German contacts, sent off to them and finally got a response and I am working (at the time of writing) in Germany for 3 months.

One of the trips I with some of the other students was to the Cotswolds, where we went to Hidcote, Kiftsgate and a nursery named Cotswold Garden Flowers, one of favourite nurseries I have ever been to. I had contacted the owner prior to this as an apprenticeship placement was available and they kindly accepted me as a 'student' for a year (the apprenticeship was not applicable to me) where I will work in different departments, help set up at shows and generally get to see as much of the trade as I can. We intended for this to start straight after Hilliers, but circumstances arose and I am starting at the beginning of 2017. This gave me the time to go to Germany.

After the year in the Cotswolds, one of my German contacts has told me that it would be all right if I started after this, and worked there for a year.

In all probability, none of these working overseas ideas would have occurred to me had I not been at Hilliers, and I'm very happy they did, and that hopefully Hilliers has changed my perspective, and opened up a new future for me, hopefully gaining contacts from all over the horticultural world.

WORKING IN THE GARDENS

Working in the four areas

From Monday to Friday, the students would work alongside the garden staff. This was the usual routine, although during important times of the year, or when something was getting out of hand in the garden – Britain in Bloom judging or a patch of weeds had become too much, for example. On these occasions, when the task was especially important, a higher member of staff would join us and tell us what needed doing and sometimes helping us with it.

Throughout the year the students would mainly work into the four main areas of the garden – Pond, Winter Garden, Centenary Border and Jermyns House – which were on a two-weekly rotation; revisiting an area after two months. If a student was only there for a short time, it would be worked out that they could work in all the areas on a different rotation.

Pond Area – This is probably the largest area and not only holds many small and large ponds, it also has an impressive woodland composed of rare and unusual trees. This area has the most natural feel of the four areas, although it has the feel of an exotic jungle rather than an English woodland; it demonstrates this with its large masses of tall bamboos and the planting of *Gunnera manicata* all crossed with paths. The woodlands are full of wonderful trees and shrubs, some of them wild-collected, all part of the SHHG collection, and some are a part of their national collections. Rather than have the national collection plants standing alone, or in pots (this would be difficult anyway as many are tree/large shrub genera), SHHG plants them in amongst other plants and creates an atmosphere whilst maintaining the health of the collections.

As the pond area is so large, the work done there is sometimes not as precise and clean as perfect garden lore would have it. This is using time effectively, so that the whole area stays in a good condition. Some of the jobs, being an area with a lot of water features, are messier and are inherently less precise – this also does not matter as that would be impossible to accomplish in this environment.

Jermyns House Area– This is the smallest area of the garden but requires precision gardening. This area surrounds Jermyns House and is the first place many important visitors will see when they come to the gardens – there are two entrances, the main one and the Jermyns House entrance, the former is for normal, paying visitors, the latter for special guests. The house also houses weddings, and many pictures are taken during. This is yet another reason why this area must be kept as immaculately as it can be.

The very setting of the area decides the fact that its upkeep demands attention. The style is relaxed-formal and fits in with the house and the surrounding woodland. It is the first area that Sir Harold Hillier planted and has avenue of Magnolia trees that he rescued from being thrown away, now fully grown, healthy specimens, underplanted with bulbs, perennials and a few shrubs. On one side of this is the heather and conifer garden which was planted by Sir Harold with many dwarf conifers in one half, and the other is a heather garden, also planted with a few conifers to counter the heathers. Other plants are included here but only the main ones described. On the other side is a woodland mainly comprised of Camellia. Behind all this is a woodland of a wide range of shrubs and trees, with paths through them. Not all is formal here.

Winter Garden – This area has been, and is in the process of being, designed to produce the maximum impact through the winter months. It is one of the largest winter gardens in Europe, and

possibly the world. It is certainly one of the most interesting, full of rare and good quality plants as is the wont of SHHG. The area has the highest impact in winter but has interest through the year because of its use of evergreens of different colours and plants whose winter interest is not their flowers. Many genera and species were used for their stem colour, including *Cornus sp.*, *Salix sp.*, *Tilia sp.*, *Styphnolobium sp.* etc. These would usually be planted so that they displayed their stems *en masse* to produce what looks like a block of colour from afar. There are plenty of *Galanthus sp.* and cultivars and *Cyclamen sp.* and other winter flowering bulbs which either carpet the ground under leafless shrubs and trees or grow in clumps throughout a planting scheme. Grasses are very important as they lighten the design and act as a counterpoint to the evergreens – they are also very effective with frost on them. The grasses are also very useful as they are attractive through most of the year. Bergenia are also extensively used – they are also attractive throughout the year but their main interest here lies in their winter leaf colour which can be an almost bright, beetroot-red and their spring flowers.

Scent has been exploited here, and some of the most powerful scents come from winter-flowering plants. Little bulbs can carry scent – some *Galanthus* cultivars and *Iris unguicularis* being the most prominent here. Trees rarely carry a scent in winter and *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Morioka Weeping' is a plant with leaves of great autumn colour and scent when they turn; of candyfloss or strawberry jam. The most important group of plants for scent is the shrub. *Chimonanthus*, *Daphne*, *Hamamelis*, *Lonicera*, *Sarcococca*, *Viburnum* are the most important, to name but a few.

Bark is very important here, and there are many trees displaying fine winter bark, many of which are quite rare. Species and cultivars of *Acer*, *Betula*, *Cercidiphyllum*, *Fraxinus*, *Luma*, *Maclura*, *Ostrya*, *Prunus*, *Pterocarya*, *Salix*, *Sterwartia* are all included for bark colour or texture, some are incidental and were there before the garden, or were planted for a different reason altogether.

The Winter garden team would not only be responsible for the upkeep of the garden, but would also take care of the area around the carpark and the visitors' centre through a bi-weekly litter pick.

Centenary Border – This area includes the outlying areas of Ten Acres East and West, which lie either side of the actual borders. Ten Acres West includes Hydrangea walk, planted with many different types of hydrangea and camellia and other appropriate plants. Ten Acres East is planted with many Hamamelis, as well as other plants. Centenary Border is one of the longest borders in the country, and is very wide in some areas. Although not a continuous border, it gives the effect of being so – there are a few paths separating the borders that allow you to see the plants from all angles. There is a long strip of grass through the middle, with two paths running parallel by the sides – the two stretches of the border are on the outside of these two paths.

Many effects are practised here, and can include a great many different combinations as it is a mixed border – as opposed to a traditional 'Jekyll' border, with a certain colour scheme and 'traditional' plants or a 'Oudolf' border, with its many grasses and large swathes of the same plant, possibly coupled with one or two others – as this allows shrubs into the mix and uses plants with different characters, shapes and colours side by side to try to produce an stimulating effect that not only looks nice when viewed looking down the border, but also tries to provide an interesting walk as each plant looks good by the next one; the two other borders can be seen in one glance, although nice to look at, the Hillier border is more fascinating as it can be looked at in closer detail.

The border looks good throughout most of the year, and even though sparse in Winter, a few of the deciduous grasses remain along with the evergreen ones, and the hardy perennials are cut back as they turn for the worst. In spring, there are large patches of bulbs, notably *Narcissus* and a few

perennials look good as they begin growing. Summer shows off the large allium planting – *Allium hollandicum* and *A. hollandicum* ‘Purple Sensation’ along with the roses and geraniums and others. Mid-late summer to autumn is the high season of the borders. The geraniums are still out, monarda, crocosmia, helenium, aster and many others are now in full swing and the grasses will soon turn to their brown/straw/golden yellow autumn and winter colours.

Workshops

The workshops are masterclasses on practices at SHHG, which were for the whole student base to take part in. These classes were not necessarily on horticultural practices, though they were very important to understand as part of the Hilliers workforce and will prove helpful in the future, particularly considering work in large gardens like SHHG. These are provided for the students to help increase their knowledge and to build confidence in tackling areas without much need for further explanation by the area manager. These workshops would usually be on practical tasks in the garden – such as pruning and learning how to stake plants, working in a garden – guided walks and communicating with the public, or just on horticulture in general – garden design, pond care and grass-care. Others would be on the SHHG as a whole – history of the gardens, Centenary Border design and story etc. We would all be gathered together when helping out at flower shows, to make sure we knew what we were doing there. These sorts of workshops would usually be led by David Jewell or Barry Clarke, the curator/head of collections and botanist/student co-ordinator respectively.

Flower shows

The students were involved with two of the main RHS shows, Chelsea and Hampton Court flower shows. For Chelsea the three year students collaborated with Sparsholt College to produce a display about Plant Heritage. Plant Heritage is a particularly important organisation to SHHG as it is through this that the national collection scheme is done; SHHG holds 14 national collections. We were led by Chris Bird, who had designed the Sparsholt stand for many years previously.

The design showed off plant collections before the National Collection scheme, the present situation, and the future of the scheme and the direction Plant Heritage wanted to go in. SHHG provided a few of the plants that were part of its collections for the present section.

Hampton Court involved the Hillier year students and the volunteers who help out in the garden who were able to help out, making this a solely Hilliers venture. There were two stands, both the idea of Barry Clarke – one of *Rubus*, which he designed and built up himself (the most important of his 5 or so national collections), and *Cornus*, the largest collection of which is held by SHHG, which was designed and built by the students, with help from a few volunteers and Amanda Whittaker (National Collection *Crassula*) using plants provided by SHHG. The design contained only *Cornus*, to demonstrate the wide variety of plants and effects that can be had from the genus – from groundcovers, variegated leaves, winter stems, flowers, fruit etc. and contained perennials, shrubs and trees. It even contained an obelisk made by the HBGTP student of winter stems of *Cornus* woven together to demonstrate just how much it can be used. It was also surrounded by a woven fence of *Cornus* stems. We could not have done this without Barry’s guidance and experience of putting together displays for shows.

Plant Identification sessions

These would involve learning a set of 15 plants, the list of which we were given the week previously, and identifying them from a selection of plants on a table. We were also obliged to bring a plant that was interesting to us and we would talk about why we picked it. We would talk about our own plants first and then complete the ident, where we would write the genus, species, cultivar/variety etc., family, country of origin and any extra notes. Each person took it in turn to say what they had written down about the plant they thought it was. Later on in the year we were given more to learn about the plant, such as the nomenclature, propagation, cultivation, etc.

I felt this an excellent exercise to help learn more about plants you had heard of, and to introduce us to new plants which may be under-used or rarely grown.

Ampfield House

Three times a year at Ampfield House, a number of top horticulturists would meet and discuss plants. The idea is very similar to the students presenting a plant they found interesting, although this time, the people may have come across it in the wild, or grow it at their nursery, or it may be new, or not even introduced on to the market. It is a great place to meet excellent plantsmen and get new contacts. People have included gardeners, botanists, plant collectors, nurserymen, specialists, plant breeders, as well as amateurs. This little meeting is not well known as it is only for friends of the Hillier gardens and nurseries and is kept that way. I would encourage any budding students to go to these meetings and introduce yourself to these people and allow them to teach you.

SPENDING

The money from the Merlin Trust was for travel. The travelling throughout the year to which I designated the Merlin money was for the expensive modes of transport which I needed to take throughout my stay – the buses were very expensive when the price of the fare and the distance travelled is taken into account.

The money I attributed to the amount Merlin awarded me was spent in two ways, on train fares when I took holidays where I would travel back home on the train (With regard to the many student excursions we took, I did not add the money spent to the total as they were neither essential, nor were they very expensive (re. train trips). The most often way I would utilise the money provided was with the many bus trips I took. These would usually go either into Romsey (west from Hilliers) or into Winchester (east from Hilliers). These are two very useful places that are easily accessed through the use of the buses; Romsey has many charity shops, a few restaurants, and most importantly, an ALDI and a Waitrose nearby from which the students are able to buy their food and essentials etc. Winchester is an interesting city with a high street holding many different types of shop. Winchester is considered an expensive place to shop and I would only buy luxuries there, but would mainly visit because half of my family are situated there and it is usually only on rare occasions that I would meet with them. There are a few charity shops and bookshops there, which I did frequently frequent. I do not drive a car so the buses were essential, although they did take quite a bit of money.

The rates for a single to Winchester (a 30 minute trip) were £4.80, the day-return being around £5.40.

The rates to reach Romsey (around 10 minutes) seemed to be different whenever I took them!

As I got used to these buses, with their times and costs I gradually developed ways of conserving my money, which anyone thinking about applying to become a Hilliers student (and I highly recommend it) should consider. I would often carpool with the other students who did have cars and would often go on shopping trips with a carful of people. Other times this was not possible, or I needed to go shopping and nobody else did. In these instances, I would go into Romsey on foot, and take the bus home so I was not walking back with heavy bags of shopping. The buses from Romsey to Hilliers tended to be either £1.75, £1 or 50p, with no apparent reason. It is important to note that there are two different bus routes you could take; one takes you to the gates of Hilliers and the closest the other takes you is a good few hundred metres away – not nice to walk when you're carrying a weeks-worth of shopping in your hands.

I would sometimes carpool with anyone who was heading in the Winchester direction, although the extortionate rates significantly lower themselves to a handy 50p if you buy a Nightrider ticket after 7 o'clock. I would often wait for the buses in this price range to save my money in exchange for a few hours in Winchester – unless I needed to go earlier. The waiting was worth it – the amount of money awarded to me came to just under the total received from the trust. I would also try to buy the train tickets around a month before the trip as the prices increase by quite a lot during this period.

All this took quite a hefty amount of the money, even though I took the effort to conserve the money as much as possible. The amount awarded was £344 and the total spent was £341.30.

	Bus	Train	Total (out of £344)
Accumulation	£57.30	£284	£341.30 (£2.70 not spent)
Average fare -Winchester to Manchester: 7 trips		284/7 = £40.60	

CONCLUSION

My year at SHHG was a great step into the practical world of horticulture, which is exactly what I was looking for, where I learned a range of essential skills required as a gardener. Through the identification sessions we also got to know about the plants themselves – the practical skills and workshops taught by knowledgeable people and the idents led by a very good plantsman is a combination hard to beat.

To me, SHHG is one of the best horticultural institutes I have seen. It combines an amazing range of plants, a large number of contacts – some of whom have collected plants now grown at the gardens, and is also a very attractive place to be. SHHG has virtually no plant left unlabelled, which is very rare in my experience, and you can learn a lot by just walking around and taking in the plants and their names. They can be read about in books, and pictures of them seen, but at SHHG such a wide variety of plants is grown that you will almost certainly be able to find the plant you want to grow, and see how it grows etc.

As I have already briefly mentioned, getting your name known is very important in horticulture, as it is a small world, and one can form almost a web of contacts, each connecting to one another. I came to Germany through contacts of the Director of SHHG, and am writing this whilst in Germany, and have already come across people connected through the two places I am working, and one with my next German venture.

Hilliers has been one of the first important steps on the horticultural ladder and that as time goes by I will make more and more contacts all over the horticultural world. The international students opened my eyes to the prospect of working in a different country, and as there are a few other countries with Horticulture as high on the agenda as England I hope that I can work my way around these.

I got to know the director (from Germany) fairly well towards the latter part of my time there, as after my time at Hilliers I was interested in going to Germany and working there for a while. The student co-ordinator and the curator both saw I was an enthusiastic plantsman, and I felt they appreciated the interest, and it was very nice to meet people with the same passion as I have. I think that if you display interest and knowledge about plants, generally or specifically you will be appreciated at Hilliers, and may get to meet other people with that same interest, or be introduced to a society with the self-same interest.