

# HARLOW CAR GARDENS AND THE TRADE

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*Harlow Car Gardens, Crag Lane, Harrogate, North Yorkshire*

## INTRODUCTION

Harlow Car Gardens is the headquarters of the Northern Horticultural Society (NHS), an organization established just after World War Two to serve home gardeners in the north of England—its traditional area of activity having been “twixt Trent and Tweed”. Today the NHS has a wider remit and its gardens fill a more extensive role than could have ever been envisaged by the founders.

The original concept of a trial gardens for the north of England remains, but Harlow Car is also of international stature and maintains an important living collection of horticultural and botanical subjects. A member of the International Association of Botanic Gardens and a centre for the teaching and examinations of the City and Guilds of London Institute and The Royal Horticultural Society, Harlow Car is a remarkable hybrid without parallel in the United Kingdom.

Situated some 150 metres above the sea level on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales and on a heavy acid clay soil, it presents gardeners and nurserymen with a realistic picture of what can be achieved in a harsh northerly climate on an uncompromising soil. Consisting of over 24 ha of landscaped gardens, Harlow Car not only conducts horticultural trials, but aims to embrace a wide diversity of horticultural activities. An arboretum, woodland, rock and heather gardens, together with bulb and rose gardens, display a broad range of plant material for study and enjoyment. The recent addition of a greenhouse teaching facility has further advanced the opportunities available for both public and vocational education. Together with the study centre, which comprises a classroom, horticultural library, and accommodation for botanical collections, Harlow Car offers anyone interested in horticulture or botany a unique opportunity to improve their knowledge.

**Funding.** For the maintenance and development of the gardens this comes primarily from the membership of the NHS (which now has reciprocal terms with The Royal Horticultural Society), gate receipts, and grant aid and support from bodies like the Countryside Commission and Manpower Services Commission. An educational charity, the NHS is independent and receives no direct government aid, so the support of the gardening public and the horticultural trade are vital for its continued success.

**Relationship with the trade.** In years gone by, it was a popular notion within the trade that Harlow Car was somewhat sophisti-

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cated, purist, and untouchable. On my arrival seven years ago that was certainly the impression which colleagues in the trade gave to me and I can understand how it arose, for there were people within the Society who considered the trade to be vulgar and that Harlow Car should not readily associate with it.

I hope that over the past few years much of the misconception about what we are and who we are has been dispelled. I must here thank the local field officer of the Horticultural Trade Association, Mr. Jim Parnham and the Regional Horticultural Advisor of the Agricultural Training Board, Mr. Guy Lloyd, for having assisted me greatly in both using Harlow Car and introducing it to the trade in the north of England.

**Plant collections.** With current happy relationships I can see the development of links between Harlow Car and the trade continuing not only in present areas of activity, but diversifying into others too. Harlow Car is an important living plant resource. It is not just a pleasant garden where the wares of the nursery stock industry are displayed, but a reservoir of plant material just waiting to get out into the trade.

We have no intention of becoming a stock bed for the nursery industry, but we are a source of propagating material when a grower wishes to introduce a new line. This new line may be truly new to the trade, such as a collection from a Chinese or Chilean expedition, or it may be an old cultivar that is returning to popularity.

The living plant collection at Harlow Car is available to the trade, and while all our holdings have yet to be recorded in detail, the woody plant collection is in order and it is hoped that a catalogue of our woody plant resources can be made available to interested parties in the near future. An idea of the range of seed-bearing plants growing at Harlow Car can be obtained from our annual Index Seminum (seed list). Primarily prepared for distribution to our members and to botanical and horticultural institutions world-wide, we are always happy to send members of the trade a copy and to deal as sympathetically with their requests as possible. Again, it is intended that the seed resource be used as a means to obtain stock, rather than to be a continual annual source of the same material.

The living plant collection has another function too, that of a permanent advertisement for the plant kingdom. It is true that we grow many plants which are unlikely to ever be sensible propositions for the nursery stock industry, but we do maintain most of the important species and cultivars grown by the trade and suitable for northern gardens. The trade can assist us greatly in the promotion of its plants and products by ensuring that we know about them and, whenever possible, sending material to us for display. While we cannot actively promote companies in a commercial sense, cultivars of new plants, even when licensed for production by a single grower, can legitimately be displayed and their merits espoused.

**Seed trials.** In the seed trade this is often done in our trials of new cultivars or demonstrations of cultivars of a single genus. Evaluations are made for home gardeners in our quarterly journal, *The Northern Gardener*, and we seek to be positive, recommending good cultivars, but not damning the less successful. The public can make their own visual analysis of our trials and judge for themselves the usefulness of each.

A more detailed analysis of our trials is often available, depending upon the criteria established at the outset and the body for whom we are conducting trials. With the increase in cooperation with the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) it is expected that many of our trials will be conducted in parallel with those at Wisley, the RHS gardens. Apart from trials and demonstrations conducted in the public part of the garden for the benefit of the home gardener, we undertake trials financed by companies and growers in a private area and produce detailed reports on plants that they are considering launching upon the home gardening market.

An important new clonal selection programme is currently under discussion with a major grower group and it is this kind of cooperation which we are anxious to see become part of our trials and research programme.

**Training programmes.** Alongside the practical work within the gardens we operate a training programme for young people. This is now a formalised scheme and grew out of our desire to use the plant collections for teaching, particularly of those who have a practical aptitude rather than an academic one.

An initial informal programme has now developed into what we consider to be one of the finest basic craft skills courses in the country. Not a course to replace anything offered by the horticultural colleges, but one which provides good basic skills for those who wish to later attend college, and more importantly a craft skills and plant knowledge oriented programme which provides the grounding for skilled craftsmen, workers who are in increasingly short supply in the nursery industry. Despite the fact that our training is not industry oriented, many of our trainees have found satisfactory employment in the trade.

It was a belief that this would be so, that led the Agricultural Training Board (ATB) to support our training programme and embrace it within the Horticultural Training Scheme—as far as I know the only training provided at a non-commercial establishment thus approved. This is very useful for the non-academic trainee who requires some kind of on-going structured training which he can take with him into the industry.

Trainees are primarily accepted through the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), operated by Harrogate Borough Council, although we do have a number outside this group who are usually a little older and funded independently. The latter generally spend a year with

us, but those on the YTS programme have a full two years at the gardens.

Practical training in all aspects of horticultural practice is provided by circulating the trainees around the different departments of the gardens. Formal instruction consists of City and Guilds Phase 1—Principles of Horticulture, and City and Guilds Phase 2, Year 1, Amenity Horticulture—both being taught in-house. In addition, other formal instruction includes plant identification tests and the opportunity to study evening courses such as the RHS General Examination in Horticulture.

Evening classwork is not compulsory, trainees joining non-vocational students on such courses without charge if they are sufficiently motivated. While we do not direct our training towards the trade, we do feel that our trainees are suitable material for the trade to work with, foundation skills and basic plant knowledge having been established. Already this is being appreciated locally and approaches for suitable young workers have been made by a number of nurseries and several have entered and established themselves successfully in the industry.

Apart from our trainee programme we instruct and host short courses for the ATB. These are usually plant oriented, although a very successful course for retailers of garden chemicals has been instituted and the entire plant identification package used nationally was developed at Harlow Car. With the broadening remit of the ATB, it is likely that our links with the trade in this field of training will continue to develop. Professional seminars instituted by ourselves and also hosted on behalf of other organizations like the Institute of Horticulture regularly feature in our calendar. Events hosted by different sectors of the trade, although a recent innovation, are likely to be an area of expansion.

Harlow Car Gardens is an outward looking organisation which seeks to embrace all horticultural interests. From very tenuous and often uncomfortable links with the trade in years gone by, it has grown and developed so that now a happier liaison exists. A realization that both the Northern Horticultural Society and the horticultural trade had common interests which should be jointly exploited has developed into a burgeoning bud. It now needs steady feeding to ensure that it turns into a full blown blossom.