# RHS Qualifications
# Examiner Comments

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| **Examination:** | RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Plant Growth and Development |
| **Unit:** | Unit 2 |
| **Examination date:** | 14th October 2025 |

## General Introductory Comments

Examiners' comments are produced by RHS Qualifications following each examination series. They are intended to help students to prepare for RHS examinations by having a better understanding of the requirements of the paper. These comments are also intended to help tutors to understand the challenges that candidates may have in developing their responses to the questions.

There have now been multiple papers for the Level 2 examinations and all stakeholders are now familiar with the format, structure and demand of the papers.

The RHS Level 2 examination papers are designed to assess the contents of the Qualification Specification according to Ofqual's level descriptors.

At Level 2 these state that candidates should:

- possess a knowledge and understanding of facts, procedures and ideas within the field of horticulture
- be able to complete well defined tasks and address straightforward problems
- be aware of a range of information that is relevant to horticulture and demonstrate an ability to interpret and use relevant information and ideas to inform actions
- be able to apply knowledge, both to unfamiliar situations and by exploring links within and across Topics and Elements.

# Overview of Examination

## Levels of demand

Questions were set at three levels of demand within this paper.

Questions that require a recall of basic factual knowledge are classified as being **low demand**.

Questions that require the recall of more technical concepts or the application of knowledge are classified as **medium demand**.

Questions that require the recall of advanced technical concepts; and which require the application of knowledge, both to unfamiliar situations and by exploring links within and across Topics and Elements are classified as **high demand**.

## General comments

Performance in the examination varied according to both **candidate preparation** and **examination technique**.

Candidates who were well prepared and who applied effective examination technique by tailoring their responses to the specific requirements of the question were able to achieve higher marks. These candidates demonstrated secure horticultural knowledge and were able to state relevant facts and principles, apply these through appropriate examples, and link key factors and influences to show integrated understanding.

Some candidates demonstrated strong horticultural knowledge and were able to state facts and principles, provide examples, and show understanding of key influences. However, these candidates did not sufficiently link their knowledge to the requirements of the question. As a result, responses often described what candidates knew about the topic, rather than addressing the question directly, which limited the marks that could be awarded.

Other candidates demonstrated gaps in knowledge, either by omitting parts of the question or by providing responses that were brief and undeveloped. Responses that achieved lower marks often lacked the **technical depth** required for this examination. These responses typically named or described a horticultural concept, but did not demonstrate the knowledge required by a horticultural practitioner. The responses were often vague, lacked detail or evidence of understanding.

In contrast, responses demonstrating **advanced technical knowledge** explained underlying processes and principles, used accurate subject-specific language, and applied this knowledge directly to the question. Stronger answers showed clear links between facts, examples, and outcomes, demonstrating understanding rather than simple recall.

Candidates and centres are reminded that a key factor in examination success is a clear understanding of the **command words.** Candidates and centres are strongly advised to fully familiarise themselves with these terms, as they indicate the type and depth of response required.

For example:

- *State*: provide a brief descriptive point.
- *Explain*: give a clear, short, reasoned statement, often outlining a process or factor.
- *Justify*: support an answer with evidence.

The full table of command words for RHS Level 2 qualifications is provided below.

| Command word | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| Annotate | Learners should be able to apply labels and supporting information on diagrams |
| Assess | Learners are required to give a statement relating to the overall quality of the issue being considered. This could include an argument about an issue (for and against). The statement should provide evidence, with appropriate use of examples, and express an opinion about the merits of each side considered |
| Calculate | Learners should be able to carry out basic calculations, or estimate quantities of materials |
| Choose | Learners should be able to select from a range of alternatives |
| Compare | Provide a response that identifies similarities between things |
| Compare and contrast | Provide a response that both identifies similarities and identifies and evaluates differences between things |
| Complete | Learners should be able to provide short responses, or complete statements and tables |
| Deduce | Come to a decision based on information provided in the question |
| Define | Learners should be able to state formal definitions |
| Describe | Learners should be able to recall facts or applied processes in an accurate way |
| Discuss | Identify key points, explore all aspects, provide a conclusion |
| Evaluate | Learners should be able to use information supplied, as well as their own knowledge and understanding, to consider evidence for and against when making basic decisions |
| Estimate | Roughly calculate or judge the value, number, quantity, or extent of |
| Explain | Learners should be able to make clear, short, reasoned statement to explain a process or similar factor |
| Explain how and why | Learners should be able to make clear, short, reasoned statement to explain a process or similar factor<br>The 'how' asks about the procedure or process<br>The 'why' asks about the purpose of something |
| Give (a reason) | Learners should be able to clearly state reasons (facts) as directed |
| Identify | Name or characterise, for example the identification of type of plant tissue, or floral part of a plant |
| Justify | Learners should be able to provide evidence to support an answer |
| Label | Apply information to diagrams |
| List | Learners provide single word, or short phrase answers |
| Name | Learners should be able to provide a single word or short phrase answer |

| Command word | Definition |
|---|---|
| Outline | Learners should be able to provide short descriptions, for example the stages that make up a task |
| Predict | State what you think will happen, based on a given scenario and your own knowledge |
| Show that | Prove the statement in the question is correct |
| State | Learners should be able to provide brief descriptive points |
| State and explain | Make a point, and then explain or justify key aspects |
| Suggest | Learners should be able to apply their knowledge and understanding to make recommendations for actions |
| Summarise | Learners should be able to provide a brief account of the main points with regards to a topic, focussing their response on the most essential ideas. |
| Use | Learners should be able to use information provided within the question, sometimes in conjunction with their own knowledge, to carry out a task |
| Write | Learners should be able to provide a short answer as directed |

Centres have requested guidance with regards to the following terminology used within questions, and so clarification is provided below:

| Term | Explanation |
|---|---|
| Horticultural setting | Candidates may be required to state a horticultural setting, this would include garden areas, for example a productive garden, or an herbaceous border. This allows the candidate to focus their response to the setting and allows the examiner to calibrate their thinking. |
| Horticultural situation | Candidates may be required to state a horticultural situation. This allows the candidate to focus their response to the situation and allows the examiner to calibrate their thinking. A horticultural situation could be, for example, the propagation of plants for a productive garden or the application of design principles when combining plants to create an herbaceous border. |
| Growing system | Candidates may be required to state different growing systems to add context to their responses. Growing systems can be traditional, raised beds, container growing, organic, biodynamic as appropriate. |

*This example relates to edible landscapes.

## Qualification Specification and Guidance Document

The *Qualification Specification* sets out the curriculum content on which candidates will be examined.

To support delivery, the 2025 *Guidance Document* (Version 5 of which is available on QuartzWeb) provides centres with additional clarification on how to interpret the Assessment Outcomes at the breadth and depth appropriate for a Level 2 qualification.

It is important to note that the Guidance Document is *not* a comprehensive teaching manual. Instead, it highlights examples of key areas within each Assessment Outcome.

For example, if an Assessment Outcome in the Specification lists five areas, the Guidance Document may only expand on one area as an illustration. Centres and candidates are then expected to apply the same level of depth and breadth to the remaining areas.

# Section A
Questions 1 – 20

## General comments on Section A

Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) are designed to assess candidate's knowledge and understanding of the concepts covered in the 4 Topics and the 4 Qualification-wide outcomes that make up this unit.

Candidate performance varies across the three sections of the examination: with many candidates performing more strongly in Section A, than Section B and C. In this paper Section A acted as an effective discriminator, with candidates scoring a range of marks.

Candidates and centres are reminded of good examination technique with regards to MCQs Candidates should:

- Carefully read the question
- Underline any key or important words in the stem of the question
- Score through inappropriate answers
- Select the correct answer to be recorded on the response grid.

Each question is considered separately.

## Question 1

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **plant adaptations**, with specific reference to grasses and their associated **root systems**.

Candidates were required to name two **distinct** grasses commonly used in ornamental displays. In this context, the term *distinct* required candidates to select **two clearly different** grasses in order to demonstrate breadth and depth of knowledge, rather than naming two cultivars of the same species.

**Stronger responses**:

- correctly named two distinct grasses
- commonly selected grasses included *Stipa tenuissima* and *Carex oshimensis.*

**Weaker responses**:

- failed to provide a correct plant name
- named only one grass
- relied on common names rather than scientific names.

It should be noted that where a question requires a plant name, candidates are expected to use scientific naming conventions. However, it is not required that online candidates use italics, or that handwritten responses underline scientific plant names.

- candidates who correctly state a full genus and species are awarded one mark (½ mark for the genus and ½ mark for the species)
- where a common name is used, a maximum of ½ mark is awarded
- where only a genus is named, the characteristic required by the question must apply to all species within that genus.

As additional guidance, candidates and centres should note that common names are acceptable for edible crops; for example, *apple* would receive full marks. Where a question requires a named cultivar, for example for pest resistance, *Carrot* 'Flyaway' would be sufficient to gain full marks. Scientific names are not required for the identification of pests or diseases.

Candidates were then required to name the root system associated with these grasses.

**Stronger responses** correctly identified the root system as *fibrous*.

**Weaker responses** incorrectly identified the root system as a tap root, indicating gaps in plant science knowledge or insufficient preparation for the examination. Other responses used vague terminology, such as *lateral*, which does not accurately describe a fibrous root system.

Candidates were then required to explain one advantage provided by a fibrous root system.

**Stronger responses** correctly explained that:

- fibrous root systems have a large surface area, allowing increased absorption of water compared with tap root systems
- fibrous roots are generally shallow, making them well adapted to capturing surface water, particularly following light rainfall
- the high number of roots provides resilience against grazing damage and soil disturbance.

**Weaker responses**:

- described general functions of roots that were not specific to fibrous root systems, such as anchorage
- incorrectly attributed advantages of tap roots to fibrous roots, including deep soil penetration or carbohydrate storage.

Finally, candidates were required to describe how the root system associated with grasses helps to prevent soil erosion.

**Stronger responses** correctly explained that:

- fibrous root systems create extensive contact with soil particles, binding the soil together and stabilising the surface against wind and water erosion.

**Weaker responses** were often vague or undeveloped, commonly:

- restating that roots prevent erosion without describing *how* this occurs, despite this being explicitly required by the question.

## Closing comments

While many candidates were able to name suitable ornamental grasses, weaker responses demonstrated confusion around basic plant science concepts, particularly root structure and function. A lack of understanding of fibrous root systems limited performance in the latter parts of the question.

Candidates are reminded that questions assessing plant adaptations may require not only named plant examples, but also an applied understanding of the underlying plant science.

## Question 2

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **seed adaptations** in relation to **biodiversity**.

The first part of the question required candidates to name two **distinct** plants that produce fats or oils within their seeds.

**Stronger responses**:

- correctly named suitable plant examples, such as *Helianthus annuus* and *Corylus avellana.*

**Weaker responses**:

- failed to provide suitable plant examples
- correctly identified appropriate plants but used common names rather than scientific names.

Candidates were then required to explain one advantage to the plant of producing fats or oils within its seeds.

**Stronger responses** correctly explained that:

- fats and oils provide a high-energy store to fuel germination
- fats and oils support respiration, allowing seeds to survive extended periods of dormancy
- fats and oils are not susceptible to frost damage, enabling seeds to remain viable over winter.

**Weaker responses**:

- focused on the benefits of seeds to biodiversity rather than to the plant itself, commonly discussing their value as a food source for wildlife
- incorrectly stated that fats and oils help to retain moisture within the seed.

The final part of the question required candidates to build on the statement that seeds containing fats and oils are commonly used in wild bird food mixes, by explaining one additional way in which such seeds can support biodiversity within a garden.

**Stronger responses** explained that:

- the high energy content of fats and oils supports wildlife (many candidates suggested mice), particularly during periods of high demand such as winter or breeding seasons
- seeds that overwinter can germinate in spring, producing flowering plants that provide nectar and pollen for pollinators.

**Weaker responses** were often vague, descriptive or insufficiently developed, failing to clearly explain how seeds containing fats and oils contribute to biodiversity beyond their use in bird food.

### Closing comments

While many candidates were able to identify suitable plant examples, weaker responses demonstrated limited understanding of the biological function of fats and oils within seeds. There was a frequent tendency to confuse benefits to the plant with benefits to wildlife, particularly in the middle section of the question.

Candidates are reminded that questions on adaptations require clear distinction between advantages to the organism itself and any wider biodiversity impacts. To achieve higher marks, candidates must demonstrate an understanding of seed physiology alongside the role that plant adaptations play in supporting biodiversity.

## Question 3

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **planting styles**, with specific reference to **formal planting** and the provision of **ecosystem services**.

The first part of the question required candidates to name three characteristics of formal planting styles.

**Stronger responses** correctly identified characteristics such as:

- the use of geometric shapes
- the use of symmetry
- the use of straight lines
- monochromatic planting schemes
- planting in even numbers.

**Weaker responses** were often vague or imprecise, commonly referring to:

- the use of colour palettes
- general statements about balance
- the use of hedges
- the presence of large lawns.

The second part of the question required candidates to describe two **distinct** ecosystem services provided by formal lawns.

**Stronger responses** clearly identified and described relevant ecosystem services, including:

- **Recreation**, for example the use of lawns for activities such as croquet
- **Physical health and mental wellbeing**, through enabling access to green space and opportunities to connect with nature
- **Nutrient cycling**, where grass clippings decompose and return nutrients to the rootzone.

**Weaker responses** were frequently not linked to ecosystem services and instead focused on general management outcomes or misconceptions, including:

- controlling the spread of disease through maintenance
- providing habitat for worms without linking this to a recognised ecosystem service
- statements suggesting that lawns are maintained at a certain height to protect pollinators, for example bees attempting to pollinate *Bellis perennis.*

### Closing comments

Some candidates failed to gain high marks as they were unable to clearly distinguish between formal and informal planting styles, indicating gaps in fundamental horticultural knowledge. There was also a widespread lack of understanding of the concept of ecosystem services, with many responses failing to identify recognised services or to describe how they are delivered by formal lawns.

Candidates are reminded that questions of this nature require both accurate identification of planting characteristics and an understanding of how garden features contribute to ecosystem services or other areas

of integration. Clear use of appropriate terminology and explicit links to recognised ecosystem services are essential to access higher marks.

## Question 4

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **edible landscapes**, with specific reference to allotments and **wellbeing**.

The first part of the question required candidates to define the term *allotment*.

**Stronger responses** correctly defined an allotment as:

- a piece of rented land, separate from a domestic garden, used primarily for the cultivation of edible crops.

**Weaker responses** were vague or incomplete, and commonly:

- described allotments as places for relaxation or exploration, for example heritage gardens or RHS gardens
- failed to recognise that allotments are distinct from an individual's home garden.

The second part of the question required candidates to describe two ways in which having an allotment can benefit people's wellbeing.

**Stronger responses** accurately described benefits such as:

- improved physical health through regular activity, including digging, planting and harvesting
- enhanced mental wellbeing, including reduced stress and anxiety through connection with nature and wildlife
- reduced social isolation through participation in a community focused on gardening.

**Weaker responses** lacked development or accuracy and often:

- made general statements that allotments are places where people meet, without explaining the wellbeing benefit of meeting with others
- confused allotments with formal horticultural or nature-based therapy settings.

## Closing comments

Many candidates achieved high marks on this question. However, weaker responses tended to provide only basic statements without sufficient development.

Candidates and centres are reminded that where questions require candidates to *describe*, *explain* or *discuss*, there are generally 2 marks available. The first mark is awarded for stating a relevant point, with the second mark being awarded for developing it. Development may include further explanation, relevant examples or, where appropriate, named plant examples.

## Question 5

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **historical garden styles**, with specific reference to the **Gardenesque style**.

Candidates were required to describe four key characteristics of the Gardenesque style of garden design.

**Stronger responses** correctly identified key characteristics, including:

- the Gardenesque movement's embrace of newly introduced plants
- the introduction and display of exotic species
- the treatment of plants as individual specimens, displayed as works of art
- an emphasis on highlighting the natural form and habit of individual plants
- the use of vignettes within the garden, often centred on the aesthetic qualities of single plants
- the construction of large-scale rock gardens designed to reflect the structure and appearance of natural rock formations.

**Weaker responses** included incorrect, inappropriate or irrelevant characteristics, for example:

- failing to identify defining features of the Gardenesque style and instead describing general garden elements, such as garden buildings for entertaining, without any clear linkage to Gardenesque principles
- discussing broad horticultural concepts, such as promoting biodiversity through pollen- and nectar-rich plantings, which are not defining characteristics of the Gardenesque style
- suggesting that the primary purpose of these gardens was to provide foraging habitat for decomposers, pollinators, birds and small mammals
- incorrectly identifying a high carbon footprint, intensive bedding schemes or heavy maintenance as characteristic features
- confusing the Gardenesque style with the English Landscape style, for example by incorrectly identifying the use of ha-has as a defining feature.

## Closing comments

Strong responses achieved high marks by clearly demonstrating knowledge of historical garden design and accurately describing the defining characteristics of the Gardenesque style.
However, many candidates were limited by basic or undeveloped knowledge of garden history, with some responses relying on contemporary themes such as biodiversity and sustainability rather than the historical context required by the question.

Centres and candidates are reminded that while examination questions are aligned to the qualification specification, the required depth and breadth of knowledge are outlined in the accompanying Guidance Document. Candidates should ensure they are fully prepared and able to distinguish between historical garden styles as part of their preparation for the examination.

## Question 6

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of the **economic contribution of the garden maintenance and landscaping sector within the UK**.

Candidates were required to describe four **distinct** ways in which the garden maintenance and landscaping sector supports the UK economy.

**Stronger responses** clearly explained that:

- the garden maintenance and landscaping sector provides employment for both skilled and unskilled workers, reducing unemployment and associated costs to the economy, while generating tax revenue through wages
- the sector generates significant income through commercial contracts, landscaping projects and ongoing maintenance services, contributing directly to economic activity
- employment is supported across related industries, including the production of trees, shrubs and hedging plants, as well as machinery manufacture, sales and repair
- the sector offers entry-level opportunities, such as apprenticeships, which develop skills and build a future workforce, providing long-term economic benefits.

**Weaker responses** often lacked focus or accuracy and commonly:

- confused garden retail with the garden maintenance and landscaping sector
- discussed improvements in working efficiency without linking these to economic outcomes
- focused on the role of volunteers in gardens, without addressing economic contribution to the UK economy
- discussed health and wellbeing benefits without making any clear connection to economic value.

## Closing comments

Many responses lacked sufficient explanation, with candidates often stating points without developing how these supported the UK economy. Some candidates went off topic by focusing on garden retail rather than maintenance and landscaping, while others confused environmental or wellbeing benefits with economic contribution.

Candidates are reminded that economic questions require clear and explicit links between sector activity and economic outcomes, such as employment, revenue generation and workforce development. To achieve higher marks, responses must remain focused on the specified sector and demonstrate a clear understanding of economic impact.

## Question 7

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of the impact of **climate change on horticulture**.

The first part of the question presented candidates with a statement from a recent magazine article suggesting that one opportunity arising from a changing climate is the introduction of a wider range of plants and crops to the UK. Candidates were then required to discuss one horticultural impact of this change.

**Stronger responses** explained that:

- warmer and drier summers may allow the introduction of new species and cultivars better suited to these conditions, for example figs or grapevines
- an expanded range of plants and crops may require new or adapted approaches to propagation and cultivation
- changes in plant choice may result in adjustments to pruning, propagation and ongoing plant management practices.

The majority of candidates provided strong responses to this part of the question.

The second part of the question introduced a scenario suggesting that, as a result of climate change, gardening trends may move away from highly manicured gardens towards more wildlife-friendly approaches. Candidates were then asked to explain how this shift could impact on garden maintenance.

**Stronger responses** explained that:

- increased incidence of drought may result in lawns being cut less frequently and at a higher height, encouraging the development of wildflowers and supporting biodiversity
- higher light levels and increased temperatures may lead to a greater reliance on shade, influencing pruning practices and resulting in larger shrubs or trees that provide both shade and habitat for a wider range of organisms.

**Weaker responses** were often partially correct or off topic and commonly:

- made general statements without linking climate change to changing maintenance practices or the move towards wildlife-friendly gardens
- suggested reduced working hours for professional gardeners as an impact
- provided basic statements with little or no development.

The final part of the question stated that rising temperatures in the south of the UK may lead to the loss of some native plant species. Candidates were required to identify one action that could be taken to help preserve these species.

**Stronger responses** suggested actions such as:

- collecting seed from vulnerable species and relocating plants or propagules to more suitable sites
- providing shade, either through temporary structures or by allowing neighbouring plants to develop
- applying deep mulch to conserve soil moisture around at-risk plants
- adjusting irrigation practices to support the survival of vulnerable species.

**Weaker responses**:

- often focused on breeding new, more resilient plants rather than preserving existing native species.

A significant number of candidates did not attempt this final part of the question.

## Closing comments

Candidates are reminded that questions addressing climate change often require them to draw on a broad range of horticultural principles and apply them to emerging challenges.

Effective preparation should include practising the application of knowledge across multiple topic areas and developing confidence in responding to scenario-based questions.

# Section C

Candidate responses in Section C are graded against the **assessment ladder**, shown on the following page. Centres and candidates are advised to review this carefully, as it illustrates how assessment decisions are made when grading long-form responses.

To further support understanding of the assessment process, this report includes examples of candidate responses accompanied by examiner commentary explaining how decisions were reached.

Performance in Section C ranged from stronger candidates who:

- carefully read and addressed the key requirements of the question
- produced concise, logical, and well-structured responses
- demonstrated advanced and current understanding of the subject matter
- integrated knowledge from different topic areas to provide holistic answers
- fully met the requirements of the question without including irrelevant material or omitting essential points.

By contrast, weaker responses often:
- provided very short answers lacking the required depth and breadth
- focused narrowly on isolated words from the question rather than answering it as a whole
- produced basic or vague responses with limited technical content.

In addition to the assessment ladder, responses are reviewed against the following criteria:

## Indicative content
- Strength of response
- Integration
- Horticultural knowledge

## Strength of response
Stronger responses:
- developed a logical argument directly addressing the question
- drew upon reliable information sources
- remained consistently relevant
- expressed clarity of thought
- demonstrated sound knowledge of horticultural practices.

## Integration
Candidate responses should integrate knowledge from across the syllabus, showing connections between topics to strengthen analysis and evaluation.

# Assessment ladder (for information)

| Band | Mark range | Summary | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | 12 - 15 | Fully developed (Total) | **A highly detailed, comprehensive, fully relevant response, addressing all aspects of the question**<br><br>☐ No irrelevant or incorrect material or observations at the top end of the mark range: otherwise only very minor errors/omissions (which do not detract from an otherwise strong response)<br><br>☐ Full integration/clear links demonstrated with other appropriate topics as required: a holistic approach<br><br>☐ Advanced current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated (and evidence of advanced material beyond the specification at the top end of mark range)<br><br>☐ Consistent use of correct and appropriate technical language. |
| 3 | 9 -11 | Mainly developed (Solid) | **A reasonably detailed and fairly comprehensive response, with mostly relevant observations, addressing most of the key elements of the question**<br><br>☐ Some minor evidence of irrelevant or incorrect material or observations (in what is otherwise a good response), with occasional lack of detail/omissions at times<br><br>☐ Secure evidence of some appropriate integration with other topics but some linked topic areas are occasionally overlooked or incorrect associations are made: a partially holistic approach<br><br>☐ Current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated most of the time, with occasional errors, but largely appropriate explanations and application<br><br>☐ Correct and appropriate technical language demonstrated most of the time, with some minor errors. |
| 2 | 6 - 8 | Rudimentary (Basic) | **A largely basic response with some relevant observations, addressing some key elements of the question**<br><br>☐ Some significant evidence of irrelevant or incorrect material and frequent lack of detail, with some key areas overlooked<br><br>☐ Occasional evidence of correct integration with other topics, but many areas are overlooked and incorrect associations made: little evidence of a holistic approach<br><br>☐ Current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated some of the time, but with frequent errors, and only basic explanations or application<br><br>☐ Correct and appropriate technical language only partially demonstrated but limited. Some key errors. |

| 1 | 0 - 5 | Undeveloped (Unsatisfactory) | **A largely poor response with few relevant observations, addressing few of the key elements of the question** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | ☐ Material is largely irrelevant or incorrect and lacking in any detail, with many key areas overlooked |
| | | | ☐ No, or very little evidence of correct integration with other topics, with many areas overlooked and incorrect associations made: no evidence of a holistic approach |
| | | | ☐ No or little evidence of current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated, with poor or incorrect explanations or application |
| | | | ☐ Little (if any) technical language demonstrated. Often incorrect. Key errors. |

## Question 1

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **Arts and Crafts** gardens, with specific reference to **plant selection** and **plant adaptations**.

The question set a scenario explaining that Arts and Crafts gardens commonly include features such as hedging, vertical accents and richly planted borders. Candidates were required, using *named plant examples*, to explain how adaptations of leaves, stems, flowers and growth habit influence plant selection for an Arts and Crafts garden. Candidates were further instructed to justify their chosen plant examples in relation to the design principles of the Arts and Crafts style.

**Stronger responses:**

- demonstrated a clear understanding of the key characteristics and design principles of Arts and Crafts gardens
- selected a range of appropriate plant species based on form, texture and seasonal interest before linking these characteristics to adaptations of leaves, stems, flowers and growth habit
- explored plant adaptations in sufficient technical detail, and clearly justified plant choice in relation to the Arts and Crafts aesthetic. For example, stronger candidates discussed *Alchemilla mollis*, justifying its inclusion by reference to its adaptation of hirsute leaves. This was further developed through a description of the plant's soft, scalloped foliage and the presence of hairs on the upper epidermis, which allow water droplets to be retained. These characteristics were linked to the creation of texture and a tactile, natural appearance, making the plant well suited to softening the edges of stone paths and borders in Arts and Crafts gardens.

**Weaker responses:**

- demonstrated little or no understanding of Arts and Crafts gardens
- repeated wording from the question without further development
- provided vague descriptions, for example referring to "herbaceous borders with a mix of perennials"
- failed to link named plant examples to specific plant adaptations.

**Closing comments**

This question effectively differentiated between candidates with a basic or undeveloped knowledge of plant adaptations and Arts and Crafts garden design, and those able to demonstrate a more secure and integrated understanding of the outcomes being assessed.

Future candidates should ensure they are familiar with the defining characteristics of historical garden styles and be able to justify plant selection using appropriate horticultural terminology.

Successful responses require both accurate plant knowledge and the ability to link plant adaptations clearly to design principles.

## Question 2

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **historic garden styles** in relation to **biodiversity**.

Candidates were required to discuss how historic garden styles have impacted biodiversity and were instructed to support their responses with **distinct named plant examples**.

**Stronger responses**:

- explained that most historic garden styles developed before biodiversity became an explicit design objective
- further developed their responses by recognising that, although biodiversity was not the primary driver of these styles, such gardens nonetheless created habitats that supported birds, bats and insects, thereby enhancing biodiversity
- demonstrated an understanding of how different historic styles related to nature, for example explaining that Mediaeval gardens largely excluded nature, while Renaissance gardens sought to control it through features such as bosquets (clipped and managed woodland), stating a range of named plant examples
- discussed how the Picturesque and English Landscape movements introduced idealised naturalistic landscapes, including mixed tree plantings, meadows and water features stating a range of named plant examples.

**Weaker responses**:

- provided vague or undeveloped statements that were not linked to specific historic garden styles or time periods
- focused on contemporary biodiversity principles rather than historic practice
- confused historic garden styles with the distinction between formal and informal gardens
- moved between different garden styles without clear structure, logical progression or supporting explanation.

## Closing comments

This question effectively differentiated between candidates with a secure understanding of historic garden styles and those with limited or unclear knowledge. Weaker responses often demonstrated confusion about the historical context of garden design and failed to recognise that biodiversity, as a deliberate design driver, is largely a modern concept.

Future candidates are reminded that strong responses must be firmly grounded in historical context and demonstrate an understanding of how garden styles developed *over time*, often transitioning from one to another. A clear awareness of the chronological progression of garden design enables candidates to explain how attitudes to nature evolved, rather than viewing historic styles in isolation.

Future candidates are also advised that applying modern biodiversity principles retrospectively to historic gardens limits the accuracy of responses. Instead, candidates should recognise how each style reflects the cultural, philosophical and aesthetic values of its period, and how these informed planting choices and interactions with nature.

Clear reference to named garden styles, positioned within an appropriate timeline and supported by relevant plant examples, is essential to access higher marks.

# Question 3

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **wellbeing** in relation to **horticulture and society.**

Candidates were presented with a scenario in which a Health and Wellbeing Clinic wished to create a peaceful outdoor space to support mindfulness. Candidates were required to describe and justify a range of design features to be included in the garden and to suggest and justify a selection of suitable plants.

**Stronger responses** demonstrated secure understanding by:

- discussing the overall layout of the garden, including features such as meandering paths designed to slow movement and encourage mindful engagement with the space
- recommending the use of natural materials to create a softer, more calming environment
- including small, secluded seating areas to allow privacy and quiet contemplation
- specifying water features to introduce the sound of running water, mask traffic or human noise and attract wildlife
- explaining how textural interest could be created through a combination of planting and hard landscape elements
- selecting a range of plants based on colour harmony, texture, scent and movement, with clear and well-developed justifications linked to wellbeing and mindfulness.

**Weaker responses** were often vague or insufficiently developed and commonly:

- omitted key features that allow users to feel safe, comfortable and able to sit calmly within the garden
- listed appropriate plants but described them rather than justifying their suitability for a wellbeing setting
- provided very brief responses that lacked the depth of explanation required to access higher marks.

## Closing comments

Many candidates found this question accessible, and some excellent responses were seen at the top end of the mark band, demonstrating a high level of knowledge and an ability to integrate design and plant selection effectively.

However, weaker responses revealed difficulty in applying the specific needs of a wellbeing setting, these candidates also failed to apply their plant knowledge to the specific needs of the wellbeing setting. Future candidates are reminded that scenario-based questions require clear justification of how features and plants meet the needs of the users and the intended purpose of the space.

# Question 4

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **biodiversity**, with specific reference to **maintaining wildlife habitats** in a private garden while **managing health and safety risks**.

Candidates were required to describe how wildlife habitats can be maintained, whilst also addressing safe working practices and risk reduction measures. Candidates were further instructed to include examples of **specific habitats**, **safe working practices** and **risk reduction measures** in their responses.

**Stronger responses** fully met the requirements of the question by:

▪ identifying a wide range of habitats, including ponds, log piles, stone piles, compost heaps, leaf mould bins, bat boxes and bird boxes
▪ discussing each habitat in turn, explaining how it can be maintained while also considering safe working practices and methods of risk reduction
▪ providing developed examples, such as discussing ponds and adjacent bog gardens as habitats for frogs and toads, and wet bog soils as habitat for hoverfly larvae
▪ explaining maintenance practices, including managing water levels, maintaining soil moisture in bog gardens and removing excessive vegetation that would reduce habitat value, for example through overshading
▪ identifying safe working practices, such as wearing appropriate footwear with good grip, and the avoidance of lone working practices, in case of accidents, along with using correct manual handling techniques when removing debris and undertaking routine maintenance tasks
▪ discussing risk reduction measures, including the use of gloves and eye protection to reduce the risk of injury, and incorporating sloped pond margins to reduce drowning risks for hedgehogs and other wildlife, alongside consideration of child safety.

**Weaker responses** lacked detail or omitted key aspects of the question and commonly:

▪ provided general descriptions of wildlife-friendly gardens without identifying specific habitats
▪ failed to discuss how habitats are maintained
▪ did not identify safe working practices
▪ omitted risk reduction measures
▪ made broad statements about the value of wildlife without sufficient explanation or detail.

## Closing comments

This question required candidates to address **all elements** of the task: habitat provision, maintenance, safe working practices and risk reduction. Strong responses were clearly structured and addressed each requirement explicitly.

Weaker responses often focused on only one aspect, typically habitat provision, and did not demonstrate effective exam technique. Candidates are reminded to carefully read the question and use command words as a guide to structure their answers. Where multiple requirements are stated, candidates should ensure that each is addressed clearly and supported with appropriate examples in order to access the full range of marks.