RHS Qualifications
Examiner Comments

Examination:	RHS Level 3 Certificate in the Principles of Plant Growth, Garden Planning and Applied Propagation
Unit:	Unit 1
Examination date:	15th 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 3 examinations, and all stakeholders are now familiar with the format, structure and demand of the papers.

The RHS Level 3 examination papers are designed to assess the contents of the Qualification Specification according to Ofqual's level descriptors.

At Level 3 these state that candidate responses should:

- accurately apply horticultural terminology
- make reference to scientific plant names
- clearly define key principles
- demonstrate technical knowledge
- be able to interpret, evaluate, and apply information and ideas
- be able to discuss a range of perspectives and approaches
- demonstrate the ability to resolve complex and non-routine problems

These Level 3 descriptors are embedded in the Qualification Specification as shown below:

- demonstrate factual, procedural, and theoretical knowledge (AO1)
- interpret, evaluate, and apply information and ideas (AO2)
- discuss a range of perspectives and approaches (AO2)
- resolve complex and non-routine problems (AO2/AO3)
- demonstrate and apply holistic/integrated knowledge of the four Qualification-wide outcomes and the four Topic areas considered in Unit 1.

To gain higher marks candidates should be able to demonstrate mastery in the above areas.

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, procedural and theoretical knowledge are classified as being low demand.

Questions that require the interpretation, evaluation and application of knowledge are classified as medium demand.

Questions that require integrated thinking across topics, the resolution of complex and non-routine problems, and discussions on differing perspectives or approaches are classified as high demand.

General comments

Candidate performance in the examination varied depending on the level of preparation for the examination, along with applied examination technique.

- Well-prepared candidates who had a thorough knowledge of the Topics and Qualification-wide outcomes were able to achieve high marks in the examination.
- Well-prepared candidates who applied good examination technique were also able to achieve high marks.
- Candidates who demonstrated with weaker technique, tended to score lower marks as their responses often did not match the requirements of the question.
- Unprepared candidates often showed limited knowledge of the Assessment Outcomes and weak examination technique, resulting in lower marks.

A key factor in examination success is a clear understanding of command words.

Candidates and centres are strongly advised to fully familiarise themselves with the command words commonly used in Level 3 examinations, as their purpose is to indicate the type and depth of response required.

Command word	Definition
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

Command word	Definition
Complete	Learners should be able to provide short responses, or complete statements and tables
Critically	This word is often used before a command word, for example 'Evaluate' inviting an examination of an issue from the point of view of a critic with a particular focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the points of view being expressed
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
Examine	Carefully consider a topic, and provide a detailed account
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 The 'how' asks about the procedure or process 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
Interpret	Explain the meaning of information that has been provided
Justify	Learners should be able to provide evidence to support an answer
Name	Learners should be able to provide a single word or short phrase answer
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
Suggest	Learners should be able to apply their knowledge and understanding to make recommendations for actions
Summarise	Reduce an argument to provide a brief account of the relevant information
To what extent	Examine the evidence available to include different sides of an argument, then express a view as to the merit or validity of a view or statement
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

Terminology used within questions:

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 a 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.

Additional guidance is provided with regard to the wider geographic location of candidates.

Candidate responses to examination questions should relate to UK horticulture.
It is appropriate for candidates to bring their own knowledge to questions; however, the core knowledge being assessed in this qualification relates to the cultivation of gardens and designed landscapes within the UK.

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 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 3 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

Forced answer questions are designed to test candidate's knowledge and understanding of the concepts covered in the four Topics and the four Qualification-wide outcomes that make up this unit.

At Level 3, these questions particularly relate to:

- the assessment of theoretical knowledge
- the ability to read and interpret information
- the ability to recall factual information
- the ability to apply knowledge to a range of simple scenarios
- the demonstration of procedural knowledge.

This section was well attempted by the majority of candidates, with a secure level of knowledge being displayed.

Candidates and centres are reminded of good examination technique with regards to forced answer questions:

- carefully read the question
- underline any key or important words
- score through inappropriate answers
- select the correct answer to be recorded on the response grid.

Section B

Each question is considered separately.

Question 1

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **managing plant propagation**.

Candidates were required to explain four differences between an **Annual Propagation Plan** and a **Propagation Protocol**.

Stronger responses correctly explained that:

- an Annual Propagation Plan sets out the range of plants to be propagated and the timing across a defined period, whereas a Propagation Protocol describes how to propagate a specific species or cultivar
- an Annual Propagation Plan typically operates on a seasonal or annual cycle, whereas a Propagation Protocol is used on an ongoing basis unless revised
- Annual Propagation Plans include quantities, timelines, space requirements and resource planning, whereas Propagation Protocols specify technical details such as growing media and propagation environment
- an Annual Propagation Plan covers multiple species, timings and production targets for a whole year, whereas a Propagation Protocol focuses on a single plant species or cultivar.

Weaker responses:

- were often vague, undeveloped or inaccurate
- confused Annual Propagation Plans with Propagation Protocols
- were often unfocused in structure or content
- discussed areas outside the scope of the question, for example health and safety considerations or the general importance of propagation in gardens.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to develop a clear and secure understanding of the distinction between **Annual Propagation Plans** and **Propagation Protocols**. Annual Propagation Plans are documents concerned with planning, timing, quantities, resources and production targets across a defined period, whereas Propagation Protocols provide technical instructions for how individual plant species or cultivars are propagated.

Candidates should ensure their responses focus on **directly comparing the two documents**, using accurate and subject-specific horticultural terminology.

Responses that:

- are vague, or descriptive rather than comparative
- that introduce unrelated topics such as health and safety
- discuss the general benefits of propagation

will limit the marks available. Clear, well-structured explanations that demonstrate applied understanding will achieve higher marks.

Question 2

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **seed dormancy**, with specific reference to **vernalisation**.

This question was designed to assess candidates' understanding of vernalisation in the context of seed dormancy.
The first part of the question required candidates to define the term **vernalisation**.

Stronger responses:

- correctly defined vernalisation in relation to seed dormancy.

Weaker responses:

- incorrectly defined vernalisation
- defined vernalisation outside the context of seed dormancy, for example by discussing its role in the initiation of flowers.

The second part of the question required candidates to explain how knowledge of vernalisation is used when propagating plants from seed.

Stronger responses:

- explained that vernalisation ensures seeds germinate after winter, reducing the risk of frost damage
- stated that an understanding of vernalisation can be used to inform the breaking of seed dormancy
- explained how vernalisation influences the timing of seed sowing
- recognised that knowledge of vernalisation can inform seed storage temperatures
- explained how vernalisation affects seed collection timing
- supported responses with relevant named plant examples.

Weaker responses:

- were unable to link vernalisation to seed germination
- focused on flower initiation with no reference to germination
- discussed pollination processes, which were outside the scope of the question.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they can provide a **clear and accurate definition of vernalisation** specifically in relation to seed dormancy. Candidates should be able to apply this knowledge to practical propagation contexts, explaining how vernalisation influences seed storage, sowing time and germination. Responses that focus on flowering, pollination, or other unrelated processes will not meet the requirements of the question. The use of accurate terminology and relevant plant examples will support higher-level responses.

Question 3

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of how plants are used to create **structure within a garden**.

Candidates were required to describe **three distinct plant features** that contribute to structural definition in garden design.

Stronger responses stated that:

- trees and shrubs with strong branching frameworks, such as upright stems or layered branching, contribute significantly to structure
- plants with persistent seed heads or decorative bark provide strong winter silhouettes, for example *Acer griseum*
- evergreen foliage provides year-round structural continuity, particularly during the winter months
- plants with clearly defined natural forms act as visual anchors within a planting design.

Weaker responses were often vague, undeveloped or inaccurate, for example:

- suggesting that the use of colour alone creates structural definition through rhythm
- describing climbing or creeping plants as providing structure without explaining how this is achieved
- making general statements such as plants that create structure have year-round properties, without development
- referring to vertical emphasis without linking this to specific plant characteristics
- discussing plant procurement processes rather than plant features.

Closing comments

Overall, this question was well attempted by candidates who demonstrated an understanding of how specific plant characteristics contribute to garden structure. Weaker responses tended to rely on broad design concepts or unrelated factors, rather than focusing on identifiable plant features.

Future candidates are advised to focus on **clearly defined plant characteristics**, such as branching habit, persistence of form, bark interest, or evergreen foliage, when describing how plants contribute to structure in gardens. Responses should demonstrate a clear and accurate understanding, and should avoid reliance on generalised design terms, or unrelated considerations.

Clear, accurate terminology, with precise and focused explanations will support higher-mark responses.

Question 4

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **plant procurement** and **plant production systems**.

The first part of the question required candidates to state the difference between **containerised plants** and **container-grown plants**.

Stronger responses clearly stated that:

- containerised plants are plants that have been potted into a container at some stage during the production cycle
- container-grown plants are plants that have been raised entirely within containers throughout their production.

Weaker responses were often vague, undeveloped or inaccurate, for example:

- stating that container-grown plants are in a container
- suggesting that container-grown plants do not have strong root systems
- claiming that container-grown plants are not pot bound as a defining feature
- stating that containerised plants are permanently grown in containers.

The second part of the question required candidates to explain how these differences impact on plant selection.

Stronger responses stated that:

- container-grown plants are typically more expensive than containerised plants
- containerised plants may be temporarily unavailable immediately after potting while they establish a new root system
- hardy container-grown plants are generally available year-round
- container-grown plants that are pot bound may develop spiralling roots, which can slow establishment after planting.

Weaker responses were often vague or did not relate directly to the question, indicating gaps in knowledge, for example:

- stating that containerised plants require less water
- suggesting that containerised plants are more resistant to pests and diseases
- discussing the effect of final container size on plant size without linking this to containerisation
- claiming that containerised plants are more adaptable to planting out and unaffected by container-shaped rootballs.

Closing comments

Future candidates should ensure that they can clearly distinguish between **containerised** and **container-grown** plants, using accurate horticultural terminology. Candidates should also be able to explain how these differences influence **availability**, **cost**, **establishment**, **and suitability for planting**, rather than making general

or unsupported claims. Responses that directly link production method to practical plant-selection decisions will achieve higher marks.

Question 5

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **combining plants in planting design**, with specific reference to the use of **rhythm**.

Candidates were presented with a scenario in which a client requested a planting design that demonstrated rhythm.

Candidates were then required to state **two distinct ways** in which rhythm can be achieved in planting design.

Stronger responses correctly stated that:

- the repetition of key plant species creates rhythm within a planting scheme
- the use of plants with similar form or shape establishes a visual beat or pattern
- seasonal succession, where plants flower or change together, creates rhythm and helps maintain it throughout the year
- the use of structural plants as visual anchors can guide the eye through a planting design, reinforcing rhythm.

It was noted that some candidates did not attempt this question, indicating gaps in knowledge or preparation.

Weaker responses often suggested impacts that were unrelated to the concept of rhythm, for example:

- suggesting that simple gradation of height from tall to short plants creates rhythm
- suggesting that the use of harmonising or complementary colours alone creates rhythm.

Closing comments

Some candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of rhythm as a design principle based on repetition, pattern and visual movement. However, weaker responses confused rhythm with other design principles, such as balance, proportion or colour harmony.

Future candidates are advised to ensure they understand rhythm as a **distinct planting design principle**, and can explain how it is achieved through repetition, form, sequencing and visual flow. Responses should focus on how the eye is led through a planting scheme, rather than relying on general or unrelated design concepts. Clear, well-focused explanations supported by appropriate examples will achieve higher marks.

Question 6

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** and its impact on horticultural practice.

Candidates were required to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding by stating **five impacts** of the Convention on Biological Diversity on horticulture.

Stronger responses stated:

- the impact of restrictions on the collection of wild plant material
- the introduction of access and benefit-sharing obligations
- the emphasis on the conservation of genetic resources
- increased controls and regulation relating to plant imports
- the promotion of ecosystem-based approaches to horticulture
- the encouragement of water conservation practices
- the promotion of peat-free growing systems
- the role of horticulturists in raising public awareness of biodiversity principles.

A significant number of candidates did not attempt this question, indicating gaps in knowledge and preparation.

Weaker responses:

- made general statements about the need to conserve global biodiversity without reference to the Convention
- suggested that the CBD encourages the conservation and propagation of all plant species without qualification
- incorrectly stated that the CBD has developed biodiversity index measurement systems
- claimed that the CBD recognises or awards community projects related to biodiversity.

Closing comments

Many candidates demonstrated limited understanding of the Convention on Biological Diversity and its practical implications for horticulture. Weaker responses tended to rely on broad environmental statements rather than identifying specific mechanisms, obligations, or impacts arising from the Convention.

Future candidates are advised to ensure they understand the purpose and scope of the CBD, as part of the regulation and ethical implications on the collection of plant material from the wild. Future candidates should be able to explain how these regulations and ethical implications influence horticultural practice through regulation, conservation priorities, access and benefit sharing, and professional responsibility. Responses should focus on clear, identifiable impacts rather than general aspirations or unrelated initiatives.

Question 7

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of the history of horticultural space, with specific reference to urban green space since 1900.

Candidates were required to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding by discussing how political and societal change has impacted urban green space since 1900.

Stronger responses demonstrated secure knowledge by stating:

- that urban green space at the start of the 20th century reflected Victorian influences
- that the *Dig for Victory* campaign increased the demand for, and use of, allotments
- that changes to park funding during the *Best Value* era led to a significant decline in the management of urban green space
- the increasing role of community groups in advocating for, and managing, urban green space
- a shift from ornamental and passive parks towards multifunctional, inclusive and health-promoting spaces
- increased awareness of nature and biodiversity, leading to urban green spaces delivering wider ecosystem services.

Weaker responses were vague, undeveloped, or did not address the period specified in the question, for example:

- discussing the origins of Victorian parks without relating these to political or societal change since 1900.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they address the correct historical timeframe, focusing explicitly on developments since 1900. Responses should demonstrate how political decisions and societal change have shaped the purpose, management and use of urban green spaces over time. Stronger answers will integrate historical context with clear examples, showing how shifts in policy, funding and public priorities have influenced the evolution of urban green space.

Question 8

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **horticultural heritage**, with specific reference to the role of **stories and traditions**.

Candidates were required to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding by discussing how stories and traditions can help bring horticultural heritage to life.

Stronger responses:

- defined the concepts of stories and traditions
- discussed the role of storytelling in passing knowledge and values from one generation to the next
- explained how traditional events, such as harvest festivals and harvest suppers, function as mechanisms for sharing heritage narratives
- discussed how stories of Victorian plant collectors are used to interpret and communicate living plant collections
- explored how storytelling can help connect diverse communities in community garden settings
- referred to the use of stories, characters and narratives in interpretation materials, such as posters and environmental campaigns.

Weaker responses:

- were brief and undeveloped
- lacked depth or analytical focus
- did not demonstrate the level of understanding expected at Level 3
- contained limited technical or subject-specific content
- were anecdotal or descriptive rather than factual
- relied on popular or fictional associations with trees or gardens, without linking these stories to horticultural heritage, interpretation, or established tradition.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they understand how **stories and traditions operate as interpretive tools** within horticultural heritage, rather than as isolated anecdotes or popular references. Responses should demonstrate how storytelling is used purposefully to communicate heritage values, educate audiences, and support cultural continuity. Stronger answers will combine clear definitions with relevant, well-developed examples that show applied understanding at Level 3.

Section C

Section C responses are graded using the **assessment ladder**, shown on the following page of this report. This is the same assessment ladder used for Level 2 examinations. Candidates and centres are advised to familiarise themselves with the ladder, as it explains how grading decisions are made when assessing long-form responses.

Candidate performance in Section C ranged from those who:

- demonstrated secure factual, procedural and theoretical knowledge
- were able to interpret, evaluate and apply relevant information and ideas
- were well prepared and able to produce developed long-form responses
- discussed relevant points from a range of perspectives
- considered a range of approaches
- structured their responses logically
- demonstrated a full and holistic understanding of the topic areas and Qualification-wide outcomes
- showed mastery of the areas being assessed

to those who:

- produced brief responses lacking the required level of detail
- submitted unplanned or poorly structured answers
- provided a basic framework without sufficient development
- focused on individual words from the question and wrote broadly about these, rather than addressing the question set.

In addition to the assessment ladder, candidate responses are also reviewed against the criteria outlined below:

Indicative content

- strength of response
- integration
- horticultural knowledge

Strength of response

Strong candidate responses:

- developed a clear and logical argument in direct response to the question
- drew on reliable and appropriate sources of information
- remained focused and relevant throughout
- demonstrated clarity of thought
- showed sound knowledge of horticultural practice.

Integration

Candidate responses should demonstrate appropriate integration with other relevant areas of the syllabus.

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** ☐ 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) ☐ Full integration/clear links demonstrated with other appropriate topics as required: a holistic approach ☐ Advanced current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated (and evidence of advanced material beyond the specification at the top end of mark range) ☐ 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** ☐ 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 ☐ 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 ☐ Current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated most of the time, with occasional errors, but largely appropriate explanations and application ☐ 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** ☐ Some significant evidence of irrelevant or incorrect material and frequent lack of detail, with some key areas overlooked ☐ Occasional evidence of correct integration with other topics, but many areas are overlooked and incorrect associations made: little evidence of a holistic approach ☐ Current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated some of the time, but with frequent errors, and only basic explanations or application ☐ 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' applied knowledge and understanding of Tudor gardens (1485–1603).

Candidates were required to produce a long-form response to the following question:
Describe the main features and design ideas used in Tudor gardens. Then explain how these features relate to the political, social and cultural influences of the Tudor period.

Stronger responses achieved higher marks and included discussion of:

- the design principles underpinning Tudor gardens, including symmetry, geometric layout and the use of knot gardens
- the use of viewing mounts and axial paths, reflecting Renaissance ideas of order and control
- heraldic and symbolic planting, such as the Tudor rose to demonstrate loyalty, and planting with religious significance
- the inclusion of kitchen gardens and orchards to provide herbs, fruit and vegetables
- kitchen gardens and orchards as expressions of utility
- monastic influences, for example the use of cloister-style garden layouts
- gardens as political statements of power and sophistication, for example at Hampton Court
- gardens as displays of wealth and status
- the concept of gardens as demonstrations of dominance over nature through highly structured landscapes
- the use of gardens for social purposes, including banquets and court entertainments such as masques
- increased influence from continental Europe, particularly during the reign of Elizabeth I, leading to the adoption of Italian design ideas
- the impact of the discovery of the Americas, resulting in the introduction of new plants and trends, for example tobacco and potatoes.

Weaker responses:

- were brief and undeveloped, with few creditworthy points
- focused on contrasting medieval and Tudor gardens rather than addressing the question set
- discussed generic garden features that could apply to multiple historical periods
- failed to link garden features to the political, social and cultural influences of the Tudor period.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they address both parts of two-part questions, combining accurate description of Tudor Garden features with clear explanation of how these reflect the political authority, social structure and cultural influences of the period. Stronger responses will integrate historical context with specific examples, demonstrating how garden design functioned as an expression of power, identity and influence during the Tudor era.

Question 2

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **reliable information sources**.

Candidates were required to evaluate the role of reliable information in the effective management of gardens. Candidates were further instructed that their responses should:

- identify and provide examples of different types of information sources
- explain the criteria used to assess the reliability of these sources
- discuss how reliable information supports informed decision-making.

This was not a popular question choice among candidates.

Stronger responses:

- identified peer-reviewed journals as reliable information sources that provide research-based insights into horticultural topics, for example soil management
- referred to horticultural databases, such as the RHS Plant Finder or Botanic Gardens Conservation International, as authoritative sources of plant information
- recognised professional advice and guidance from qualified horticulturists as reliable sources based on recognised expertise
- referred to publications and guidance produced by specialist societies and professional bodies
- discussed the use of archives, historic plans and records when researching the management of heritage gardens
- explained that reliability can be assessed through the credentials of the author or publishing organisation
- considered publication date and peer-review status when judging reliability
- discussed the importance of referencing, methodology, bias and conflicts of interest when evaluating sources
- applied reliable information to practical decision-making, for example:
    - interpreting data on hardiness
    - assessing plant stress tolerance, such as drought resistance
    - understanding shade tolerance
    - ensuring appropriate plant selection for site conditions, including soil pH.

Weaker responses:

- listed information sources without evaluation
- ignored the requirement to explain how reliability is assessed
- failed to address the question and instead discussed unrelated topics, such as conservation management plans
- provided vague or undeveloped examples, for example stating that "knowledge is power" or referring generally to researching plant sizes.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they fully understand the meaning of the command word **evaluate**. In this context, *evaluate* requires candidates to go beyond describing or listing information sources. Responses should assess the **value, reliability and usefulness** of different sources, supported by clear reasoning and appropriate examples.

Stronger responses will explain **why** particular sources are considered reliable, for example by referring to author expertise, peer review, publication date, transparency of methodology, and the presence of referencing or declared bias. Candidates should then demonstrate how the use of reliable information **directly supports effective decision-making** in garden management, such as plant selection, soil management, or responses to environmental stress.

Candidates are also advised to structure their responses clearly, addressing each part of the question in turn. Simply naming sources, making general statements about research, or using phrases such as “knowledge is power” without explanation will not meet the requirements of an evaluative question.

Question 3

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **design principles**.

Candidates were required to select **one well-known garden designer**, explain their core design principles, and describe how these principles could be applied to the design of a **modern domestic garden**.

This was a popular question; however, many candidates did not achieve high marks.

Stronger responses:

- selected an appropriate and well-known garden designer, most commonly Piet Oudolf, Gertrude Jekyll or Nigel Dunnett
- clearly described design principles that were specific to the named designer, supported by named examples of gardens they had designed
- fully explained how these design principles could be adapted and applied to a modern domestic garden, making reference to key design concepts such as proportion, scale, structure, plant selection, and plant associations.

Weaker responses:

- selected individuals whose primary professional practice was in the field of plantsmanship and planting plans, rather than the more specific field of garden design, which encompasses spatial elements, along with associated hard landscaping decisions. This limited the detail candidates could bring to their response.
- focused on garden styles rather than individual designers, for example Arts and Crafts, which did not meet the requirements of the question
- produced accurate descriptions of a designer's work but failed to explain how the principles could be applied to a modern domestic garden context.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to read the question carefully and ensure that **all parts are addressed**. This question required candidates to do more than describe a designer's work; it required explanation of **core design principles** and clear application of those principles to a **contemporary domestic garden**.

Candidates should ensure that the designer selected is **widely recognised for their design practice**, and that sufficient examples exist to support discussion. Stronger responses will identify principles that are distinctive to the chosen designer and illustrate these with named gardens or projects.

Candidates are also advised to demonstrate application by explaining **how and why** these principles could be adapted for a modern domestic setting. This may include consideration of scale, function, maintenance, sustainability, and user needs. Responses that focus solely on historical description, personal preference, or garden styles rather than designers will limit the marks available.

High-scoring responses will be well structured, clearly written, and will integrate design theory with practical application, showing a secure understanding of both design principles and their relevance to domestic gardens.

Question 4

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **plant propagation** in the context of **horticultural heritage**.

Candidates were required to respond to the question: *How can a heritage garden effectively source and propagate plant material that is difficult to obtain, in order to preserve historical accuracy?*

This was a popular question amongst candidates.

Stronger responses:

- discussed the use of historical documents and records to research appropriate plant material
- referred to historic nursery catalogues as a means of determining plant authenticity
- considered collaboration with botanic gardens and conservation organisations, for example Plant Heritage or the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which may hold historic cultivars
- suggested the use of heritage-focused seed banks
- discussed seed exchanges and seed-sharing networks
- explained a range of appropriate propagation techniques in detail, including:
    - seed germination, with named methods used to break seed dormancy
    - tissue culture to produce disease-free material or to clean stock of viral pathogens
    - the use of historically authentic methods, such as hotbeds and cold frames, to align with the heritage context
- discussed the importance of documentation and record-keeping
- reviewed historical propagation methods against current Best Practice and sustainability considerations.

Weaker responses:

- produced lists of propagation techniques without explanation
- failed to address the sourcing of plant material
- provided vague or undeveloped responses
- focused on detailed single case studies, limiting the demonstration of breadth of knowledge
- addressed only selected aspects of the question, rather than responding holistically.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they address **both sourcing and propagation** when answering similar questions. Stronger responses demonstrate an understanding that preserving historical accuracy in heritage gardens requires careful research, ethical sourcing, and appropriate propagation methods, supported by accurate documentation.

Candidates should aim to balance historical authenticity with modern Best Practice, including biosecurity, plant health and sustainability.

Simply listing techniques or organisations is insufficient at Level 3; responses should explain **how and why** particular approaches are suitable in a heritage context. Clear structure, subject-specific terminology, and inclusion of sourcing, propagation and record-keeping will support higher-mark responses.