



# RHS Qualifications

## Examiner Comments

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<b>Examination:</b>	RHS Level 3
<b>Unit:</b>	Unit 2
<b>Examination date:</b>	February 2026

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### 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. 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
Complete	Learners should be able to provide short responses, or complete statements and tables

Command word	Definition
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

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 from RHS Qualifications and downloadable from Quartz) 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' knowledge and understanding of hard landscaping elements, their role within Cottage Gardens, and the contribution that material selection and layout can make to sustainability and garden character.

The first part of this question required candidates to state two examples of hard landscaping features commonly found in Cottage Gardens.

Stronger responses:

- correctly identified hard landscaping features associated with Cottage Gardens, including gravel paths, brick paths, picket fences, woven willow fencing, rustic gates, pergolas, arches, timber benches, stone walls, and raised beds
- selected examples that were clearly hard landscaping features rather than planting elements, for example, differentiating low plant supports from hard landscaping features

Weaker responses:

- confused hard landscaping features with soft landscaping features, such as woven willow supports for herbaceous plants
- provided examples associated with other distinct garden styles
- gave vague responses that lacked sufficient detail to identify a specific feature

The second part of this question required candidates to explain two ways in which the selection of materials for hard landscaping features can support sustainability.

Stronger responses:

- explained how the use of locally sourced materials can reduce transportation distances and associated carbon emissions, and support the cottage garden style
- discussed the use of recycled, reclaimed, or repurposed materials to reduce the impact of producing new/virgin materials and minimise waste
- referred to the use of sustainably sourced timber from certified sources
- explained how durable materials can reduce the need for replacement, thereby lowering the impact of having to replace materials
- discussed the use of permeable materials that support SuDS and reduce surface water runoff

Weaker responses:

- made general statements about the pillars of sustainability
- did not sufficiently differentiate sustainability from concepts such as aesthetics or maintenance requirements, creating vague and undeveloped responses
- Listed materials without explaining how they contributed to sustainability
- lacked sufficient development to satisfy the command word 'explain'.

The final part of the question required candidates to describe one way that the layout of hard landscaping can enhance the aesthetic of a Cottage Garden.

#### Stronger responses:

- described how meandering or informal paths can create a sense of exploration and reinforce the informal nature of the Cottage Garden style
- explained how hard landscaping can be used to frame views, create focal points, or divide the garden into smaller more intimate spaces
- referred to the integration of structures such as arches, gates, and pergolas to create visual interest and support climbing plants
- explained how the layout of paths and seating areas can encourage appreciation of planting displays and seasonal interest

#### Weaker responses:

- provided descriptions of hard landscaping features without discussing layout
- focused on maintenance or practical considerations rather than aesthetics
- provided vague statements such as “it makes the garden look attractive” without further development

#### Closing comments:

Most candidates were able to state suitable hard landscaping features associated with Cottage Gardens. Greater differentiation occurred in the second and third parts of the question where stronger candidates successfully applied knowledge of sustainability principles and design concepts. Weaker candidate responses often lacked development and did not fully address the command words used within the question.

#### Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a secure understanding of the distinction between hard and soft landscaping elements
- revise the key characteristics associated with major garden styles, including Cottage Gardens
- ensure responses to ‘explain’ and ‘describe’ questions are sufficiently developed, in both cases candidates should supply a key fact, ideally from the qualification specification, and then provide development by explaining, or describing
- use appropriate horticultural terminology to support their answers
- practise applying sustainability principles to material selection and garden construction
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

## Question 2

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of the management of trees within gardens, including their role within modernist garden design and the influence of sustainability on tree management practices.

The first part of this question required candidates to state two roles that trees play within modernist gardens.

Stronger responses included:

- correctly identified trees as architectural elements within modernist garden design
- referred to the use of trees as focal points or specimen features
- explained the role of trees in framing views and defining spaces within the garden
- referred to trees providing structure, form, and vertical emphasis within simple planting schemes
- identified the role of trees in creating shade and modifying microclimates
- referred to the use of trees to soften the visual impact of buildings and hard landscaping features

Weaker responses:

- provided general functions of trees without relating these to modernist gardens
- confused the characteristics of modernist gardens with those of other garden styles
- provided vague or undeveloped responses
- focused on sustainability/biodiversity benefits rather than the design role required by the question

The second part of this question required candidates to explain two sustainable maintenance considerations that influence how trees are managed in gardens.

Stronger responses:

- referred to the use of mulches to conserve soil moisture, suppress weeds, and improve soil health while reducing maintenance inputs
- discussed the importance of selecting appropriate pruning regimes that maintain tree health and longevity while minimising unnecessary intervention
- referred to water management strategies during establishment, including efficient irrigation and rainwater harvesting
- explained how monitoring tree health can reduce the need for reactive management and support long-term sustainability objectives
- discussed the retention of deadwood where appropriate to support biodiversity while balancing safety considerations

Weaker responses:

- provided general maintenance activities without linking them to sustainability
- confused sustainable management with tree planting
- listed maintenance tasks without explanation
- lacked sufficient development to satisfy the command word 'explain'

Closing comments:

Most candidates demonstrated a basic understanding of the role of trees within gardens. Higher-scoring responses successfully applied this knowledge to modernist garden design and demonstrated a secure understanding of how sustainability principles influence tree management decisions.

Weaker responses often lacked development or failed to relate their answers to the specific context given within the question.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a secure understanding of the characteristics of major garden styles and the role that plants play within them
- ensure responses to 'explain' questions are fully developed and supported by appropriate horticultural knowledge
- read questions carefully to ensure answers address the specific context requirement of the question.
- practise applying sustainability principles to practical horticultural management scenarios
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

### Question 3

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of productive growing systems, with particular reference to Certified Organic Production.

The first part of this question required candidates to define the term 'Certified Organic Production'.

Stronger responses:

- stated that Certified Organic Production is a system of production that complies with recognised organic standards and regulations
- referred to inspection and certification by an approved certification body, for example the Soil Association

Weaker responses:

- confused organic production with sustainable principles
- stated that organic production is a system of production without using chemicals, growing without chemicals, without reference to synthetic chemicals
- discussed the principles of developing soil, boosting biodiversity, and avoiding synthetic chemical inputs, without reference to certification or standards
- provided vague responses that demonstrated limited understanding of the term "certified"

The second part of this question required candidates to explain one advantage and one disadvantage of Certified Organic Production.

Stronger responses:

- explained advantages such as reduced reliance on synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, leading to improvements in soil health, increased biodiversity,
- referred to consumer confidence resulting from independently verified certification standards providing access to premium markets and so higher returns
- explained disadvantages such as potential lower yields, increased labour requirements, certification costs, or limitations on available pest and disease management options

Weaker responses:

- provided statements without development
- provided descriptions of organic production
- provided brief responses without stating if they were advantages or disadvantages
- repeated similar points for both the advantage and disadvantage
- repeated the definition provided in the first part of the question

Closing comments:

Candidate performance on this question was mixed.

Many candidates demonstrated a general awareness of organic production systems; however fewer candidates demonstrated a secure understanding of Certified Organic Production.

Stronger responses provided secure advantages and disadvantages of Certified Organic Production.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a secure understanding of the terminology used within productive horticulture
- revise the principles and requirements of Certified Organic Production systems
- understand the distinction between organic, sustainable, and conventional production systems
- ensure responses to 'explain' questions are fully developed rather than descriptive
- consider both environmental and economic implications when evaluating horticultural production systems

## Question 4

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of crop selection and cropping systems within productive gardens.

The question required candidates to explain two impacts that perennial vegetable crops have on space availability in a productive garden.

Stronger responses:

- explained that perennial vegetable crops occupy the same area of ground for multiple years, reducing the amount of land available for annual crop production and crop rotation systems
- discussed how crops such as asparagus, rhubarb, and globe artichokes, require dedicated growing areas that cannot easily be repurposed for other crops
- explained that perennial crops can make efficient use of space over the long term by providing repeated harvests without the need for annual cultivation, sowing, or planting
- referred to the fact that perennial crops can reduce the amount of temporary space required for propagation and establishment compared with annual crops
- discussed how the larger mature size of some perennial vegetables may increase competition for light, water, and nutrients, influencing the availability of growing space for neighbouring crops

Weaker responses:

- described perennial vegetables without discussing their impact on space availability
- confused perennial vegetables with other vegetable crops
- provided general statements about productivity without explaining the impact on space availability
- repeated the same core point in different words rather than providing two distinct impacts
- discussed competition for light, water, and nutrients without reference to perennial vegetables, and their larger mature size

Closing comments:

This question differentiated between candidates who understood the practical (applied) implications of crop planning and those who were unable to apply this knowledge. Stronger responses linked the characteristics of perennial crops to the management of growing space within productive gardens and demonstrated an understanding of the advantages and constraints associated with permanent cropping systems.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a secure understanding of the differences between annual, biennial, and perennial crops
- consider the practical implications of crop selection on garden management and productivity
- ensure that responses to 'explain' questions identify both the impact and the reason behind it
- read the question carefully and focus on the specific aspect being assessed, in this case space availability within productive gardens.
- practise applying plant knowledge to real horticultural situations
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

## Question 5

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of project management within horticultural settings.

The first part of this question required candidates to define the term project management.

Stronger responses:

- stated that project management is the process of planning, organising, coordinating, and controlling resources to achieve a defined objective
- referred to managing projects within agreed timescales, budgets, and quality requirements

Weaker responses:

- were not able to provide an accurate definition of project management
- provided vague responses lacking sufficient detail to demonstrate understanding of the term

The second part of this question required candidates to name the four key stages in the management of a horticultural project in the correct order.

Stronger responses:

- correctly identified the four stages and presented them in the correct sequence

Weaker responses:

- were not able to correctly identify four stages of project management and present them in the correct sequence
- correctly named some stages but presented them in an incorrect order
- provided vague responses lacking sufficient detail to demonstrate knowledge

Closing comments:

This question was generally answered well by candidates who were able to demonstrate secure knowledge of project management as described in the Qualification Specification.

The strongest responses demonstrated a secure understanding of both the definition of project management and the sequence of activities required to manage a horticultural project successfully.

Weaker responses often reflected limited familiarity with project management concepts or a tendency to confuse the order of the key stages.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a secure understanding of project management terminology used within horticulture
- revise the key stages of project management and their correct sequence
- read questions carefully to ensure that where an order is requested, stages are presented in the correct sequence
- practise defining technical terms using clear and concise language
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

## Question 6

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of the relationship between gardens, green spaces, and wellbeing.

The first part of this question required candidates to state two ways that access to green space can improve personal wellbeing.

Stronger responses:

- referred to the reduction of stress and anxiety through spending time in natural environments
- referred to opportunities for physical activity, which can improve physical health and fitness
- discussed social benefits, including opportunities for social interaction and reducing feelings of isolation

Weaker responses:

- provided vague statements without identifying a specific wellbeing benefit
- repeated the same core point twice using different wording
- provided responses that lacked sufficient detail to demonstrate understanding of wellbeing outcomes

The second part of this question required candidates to explain one way a garden can be designed to support the wellbeing of visitors.

Stronger responses:

- explained how the provision of seating areas can encourage relaxation, contemplation, and enjoyment of the garden environment
- referred to accessible path networks that enable visitors of differing abilities to move safely and comfortably around the garden
- discussed the use of sensory planting to engage sight, smell, touch, and sound, creating a more immersive and therapeutic experience
- referred to the design of quiet spaces that support reflection and stress reduction
- explained how water features can create calming sounds and contribute to a tranquil atmosphere

Weaker responses:

- identified design features without explaining how they supported wellbeing
- focused on the design of the garden without linking this to visitor wellbeing
- provided descriptions of gardens rather than explanations of design decisions
- lacked sufficient development to satisfy the command word 'explain'

Closing comments:

This question was generally answered well, with most candidates demonstrating an awareness of the benefits that gardens and green spaces can provide. Higher-scoring responses clearly linked garden features and green space access to specific physical, mental, or social wellbeing outcomes. Weaker responses often lacked development or failed to explain the relationship between garden design and wellbeing.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a secure understanding of the wellbeing benefits associated with gardens and green spaces
- revise how garden design can support physical, mental, and social wellbeing
- ensure responses to 'explain' questions include both the feature and its benefit

- use specific examples where appropriate to support answers
- avoid vague statements and focus on clearly linking horticultural practice to wellbeing outcomes
- practise producing responses that meet the above requirements
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

## Question 7

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of public garden management and visitor engagement.

Candidates were required to discuss the key factors that contribute to a positive visitor experience in a public garden.

Stronger responses:

- fully reflected the requirement of the qualification specification
- discussed the importance of high standards of horticultural maintenance, including healthy plants, well-maintained borders, attractive displays, and good overall presentation
- referred to accessibility, including suitable paths, ramps, provision for seating, and clear navigation
- discussed the importance of visitor facilities such as toilets, cafés, shelters, parking, and visitor centres in supporting a positive experience
- referred to effective interpretation through signs, plant labels, guided tours, educational materials, and digital resources that help visitors understand and engage with the garden
- discussed the importance of seasonal interest, ensuring that gardens provide attractive features throughout the year rather than during a single season
- referred to visitor comfort, including shade, shelter, seating, and opportunities for rest and contemplation
- discussed safety and security, including well-maintained paths, risk management, and appropriate supervision where required
- referred to the role of biodiversity, wildlife, water features, and sensory experiences in enhancing visitor enjoyment and wellbeing
- considered customer service, including welcoming staff, volunteers, and opportunities for visitor engagement
- discussed how successful public gardens balance conservation, education, recreation, and visitor expectations

Weaker responses:

- provided simple lists or short descriptions of garden features
- focused on plants and horticultural standards without considering wider aspects of visitor experience
- provided responses that lacked breadth and addressed only one aspect of the question

Closing comments:

This question provided opportunities for candidates to demonstrate a broad understanding of garden management. Higher-scoring responses recognised that visitor experience is influenced by a wide range of horticultural, operational, educational, and accessibility factors. Stronger candidates developed their discussion by linking garden management decisions to visitor outcomes.

Weaker responses were often descriptive and lacked the breadth expected by the command word 'discuss'.

Future candidates are advised to:

- ensure they demonstrate a knowledge consistent with the Qualification Specification

- develop a broad understanding of the factors that influence visitor satisfaction within public gardens
- consider both horticultural and non-horticultural aspects of garden management when answering visitor-focused questions
- support discussions with relevant examples from public gardens and visitor attractions
- ensure responses are developed sufficiently to meet the requirements of command words such as discuss
- practise writing extended discussion responses that consider multiple perspectives and factors
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

## Question 8

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of crop selection and productive garden management.

Candidates were required to discuss the main factors that inform how crops are chosen for a productive garden that is open to the public.

Stronger responses:

- discussed the importance of selecting crops that are suited to the local climate, soil conditions, and growing environment to ensure reliable production and successful cultivation
- referred to the educational value of crops, including the selection of unusual, historic, heritage, or culturally significant varieties that help engage visitors/support interpretation
- discussed the need to provide visual interest throughout the growing season, selecting crops that contribute attractive flowers, foliage, fruits, or distinctive growth habits
- referred to harvesting periods and succession cropping to ensure crops are available and attractive during periods when the garden is open to visitors
- discussed the balance between productivity and aesthetics, recognising that public productive gardens often need to be both functional and visually appealing
- referred to visitor engagement, including crops that demonstrate growing techniques, sustainability principles, seasonal food production, or historical cultivation methods
- discussed maintenance requirements and labour availability
- discussed sustainability considerations, including local food production, crop diversity, biodiversity benefits, and efficient use of resources
- referred to the intended use of the produce, for example supplying cafés, educational programmes, community activities, or retail outlets associated with the garden

Weaker responses:

- provided lists of crops rather than discussing the factors influencing crop selection
- considered only one aspect of crop choice, such as yield or appearance
- provided brief and undeveloped responses lacking discussion
- failed to consider the educational, aesthetic, or visitor engagement functions of public productive gardens

Closing comments:

This question provided candidates with an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the multiple functions of productive gardens that are open to the public. Stronger responses recognised that crop selection is influenced by a combination of horticultural, educational, aesthetic, operational, and sustainability factors. Higher-scoring candidates developed a balanced discussion that considered the needs of both crop production and visitor experience.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a broad understanding of the different purposes of productive gardens open to the public
- consider educational, aesthetic, and operational objectives alongside productivity when selecting crops
- ensure responses are sufficiently developed to meet the requirements of the command word 'discuss' and avoid relying on simple lists of example crops
- practise discussion-style responses that consider multiple factors and perspectives
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

## **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 responses with little relevance to the question
- 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)	<p><b>A highly detailed, comprehensive, fully relevant response, addressing all aspects of the question</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 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)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Full integration/clear links demonstrated with other appropriate topics as required: a holistic approach</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Advanced current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated (and evidence of advanced material beyond the specification at the top end of mark range)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Consistent use of correct and appropriate technical language.</li> </ul>
3	9 - 11	Mainly developed (Solid)	<p><b>A reasonably detailed and fairly comprehensive response, with mostly relevant observations, addressing most of the key elements of the question</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 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</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 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</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated most of the time, with occasional errors, but largely appropriate explanations and application</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Correct and appropriate technical language demonstrated most of the time, with some minor errors.</li> </ul>
2	6 - 8	Rudimentary (Basic)	<p><b>A largely basic response with some relevant observations, addressing some key elements of the question</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Some significant evidence of irrelevant or incorrect material and frequent lack of detail, with some key areas overlooked</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Occasional evidence of correct integration with other topics, but many areas are overlooked and incorrect associations made: little evidence of a holistic approach</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated some of the time, but with frequent errors, and only basic explanations or application</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Correct and appropriate technical language only partially demonstrated but limited. Some key errors.</li> </ul>
1	0 - 5	Undeveloped (Unsatisfactory)	<p><b>A largely poor response with few relevant observations, addressing few of the key elements of the question</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Material is largely irrelevant or incorrect and lacking in any detail, with many key areas overlooked</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 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</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No or little evidence of current professional horticultural knowledge/principles demonstrated, with poor or incorrect explanations or application</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Little (if any) technical language demonstrated. Often incorrect. Key errors.</li> </ul>

### Question 1

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of plant selection and the relationship between planting design and garden style.

Candidates were required to discuss the main factors that influence the selection of plants for a range of garden styles.

Stronger responses achieved higher marks and included discussion of a range of relevant points including:

- the principle that plant selection should support and reinforce the intended character of the garden style
- the influence of design characteristics, for example the use of clipped evergreens, topiary, and symmetry within Formal gardens, compared with the relaxed and informal planting associated with Cottage Gardens
- the influence of historical authenticity, particularly within heritage gardens where plant selection may be informed by the period being represented
- the role of form, texture, colour, and scale when selecting plants to complement the design intent of different garden styles
- the influence of environmental factors including soil type, drainage, aspect, exposure, hardiness, and local climate
- the principle of 'right plant, right place' and its importance in ensuring long-term success and sustainability
- the influence of maintenance requirements, recognising that some garden styles require intensive management while others seek to minimise intervention
- the role of sustainability in plant selection, including drought tolerance, climate resilience, biodiversity value, and reduced resource inputs
- the influence of intended function, for example selecting plants to provide screening, shade, seasonal interest, wildlife value, food production, or educational benefit
- the differing planting characteristics associated with recognised garden styles, such as:
  - Formal gardens using clipped plants, avenues, and structured planting
  - Cottage Gardens using dense informal planting and traditional garden plants
  - Arts and Crafts gardens using plants integrated with local materials and architectural features
  - Modernist gardens using architectural plants with strong forms and restrained planting palettes
  - Wild or naturalistic gardens using ecologically informed planting and naturalistic species combinations
- the importance of year-round interest through the careful selection of plants for seasonal succession
- the influence of client requirements, visitor expectations, and site objectives on plant selection decisions
- balanced discussion demonstrating that successful plant selection requires consideration of both design intent and practical horticultural constraints

Weaker responses:

- suggested a range of plants, without relating these plants to plant selection
- described garden styles, without relating these styles to plant selection
- provided lists of plants associated with particular styles without further development
- addressed only one garden style despite the question referring to a range of garden styles
- provided brief and undeveloped responses that lacked breadth and depth

Closing comments:

This question differentiated effectively between candidates who had a knowledge of a range of garden styles and those who applied this knowledge to understand how planting decisions are made by professional horticulturists.

Higher-scoring responses demonstrated the ability to integrate their knowledge of garden styles and specialist areas, with best practice (providing named plant examples) and sustainability considerations.

The strongest responses supported their discussion with examples from a range of recognised garden styles and demonstrated clear application of knowledge.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a secure understanding of the characteristics of major garden styles and design movements as specified in the Qualification Specification.
- consider both aesthetic and horticultural factors when discussing plant selection
- use examples from a range of garden styles to demonstrate breadth of knowledge
- develop discussion-style responses that explore multiple factors and viewpoints rather than focusing on a single aspect of plant selection
- ensure responses are sufficiently detailed to meet the requirements of higher-order command words such as 'discuss' and 'evaluate'
- practise applying plant knowledge to design scenarios
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

## Question 2

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of sustainable crop production and productive garden management.

Candidates were required to evaluate how sustainable management practices affect crop yield in productive or edible garden settings.

Stronger responses achieved higher marks and included discussion of a range of relevant points including:

- defined the concept of sustainable crop production
- explained the concept of crop yield
- stated the positive impact of improving soil health through the use of composts, organic matter, green manures, and mulches, leading to improved soil structure, nutrient availability, and crop performance
- explained the role of crop rotation in reducing pest and disease build-up while maintaining soil fertility and supporting long-term yields
- considered the positive and negative impacts of the use of integrated pest management to include tolerance of low levels of pest, cultural controls, along with strategies to reduce the negative environmental impact of crop protection
- the contribution of biodiversity, including pollinators and beneficial insects, to crop production and yield stability
- the importance of efficient water management through irrigation planning, mulching, rainwater harvesting, and soil moisture conservation
- the role of sustainable nutrient management in maintaining crop growth and productivity while reducing environmental impacts
- the use of appropriate crop selection, including disease-resistant varieties and crops suited to local growing conditions
- the role of succession cropping and careful space utilisation in maximising production from available land
- the potential for sustainable practices to improve yields over the medium and long term through improved ecosystem function and soil quality
- evaluation of situations where sustainable approaches may initially result in lower yields, for example during conversion from conventional systems or where pest and weed pressures are not fully controlled
- balanced discussion recognising that crop yield is influenced by multiple interacting factors including climate, soil, management skill, available resources, crop type and sustainable practices

Weaker responses:

- provided lists of sustainable practices without discussion
- focused on sustainability without considering crop yield
- described sustainable practices without evaluating their effect on production
- focused on organic production without addressing wider sustainable management approaches
- lacked evaluation (positive and negative factors) and therefore did not fully address the command word used within the question

Closing comments:

This question differentiated effectively between candidates who described sustainable horticultural practices and those who could evaluate their impact on productive growing systems. Higher-scoring responses recognised that sustainable management can influence crop yield positively through improved soil health, biodiversity, and resource efficiency, whilst also acknowledging potential limitations and challenges. The strongest responses demonstrated a balanced understanding of both productivity and sustainability objectives.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop a secure understanding of sustainable crop production systems and their underlying principles
- link sustainable management practices directly to crop yield and productivity outcomes
- use examples from productive horticulture to support discussion and evaluation
- avoid providing descriptive lists and instead focus on explaining and evaluating the effects of management decisions
- ensure responses address the command word 'evaluate' by considering differing viewpoints and reaching balanced conclusions
- practise evaluative responses that consider both benefits and limitations
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

### Question 3

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of garden management, with particular reference to the management of people, resources, and maintenance standards.

Candidates were required to discuss how effective people and resource management can help to achieve high maintenance standards in a garden.

Stronger responses achieved higher marks and included evaluation of a range of relevant points including:

- the relationship between effective management and the achievement of consistently high horticultural standards
- the importance of recruiting appropriately skilled staff with the knowledge and practical competence required to carry out horticultural tasks effectively
- the role of training and continuing professional development in maintaining and improving staff skills and knowledge
- the importance of supervision, communication, and leadership in ensuring maintenance activities are completed correctly and to the required standard
- the use of maintenance schedules and work plans to prioritise tasks and ensure that seasonal operations are completed at the correct time
- the allocation of labour resources to match workload, seasonal peaks, and specialist tasks
- the role of clear objectives and performance standards in helping teams understand expectations and deliver consistent outcomes
- the importance of maintaining equipment and machinery to ensure reliability, efficiency, and safe operation
- the role of budgeting and planning in ensuring sufficient resources are available for labour, equipment, plants, materials, and maintenance activities
- the importance of managing consumable resources such as composts, fertilisers, mulches, irrigation supplies, and plant protection products
- the contribution of efficient resource use to sustainability, including reducing waste, conserving water, and minimising unnecessary expenditure
- the use of project planning techniques to coordinate people, equipment, materials, and timescales for larger maintenance operations
- the importance of health and safety management, including risk assessments, training, and the provision of appropriate personal protective equipment
- the role of monitoring and reviewing maintenance standards through inspections, records, and feedback to identify areas for improvement
- the interrelationship between people management and resource management, recognising that high-quality gardens require both skilled staff and appropriate resources

Weaker responses:

- focused solely on horticultural maintenance techniques rather than management practices
- described maintenance tasks without discussing the management of people or resources
- failed to consider financial, equipment, or labour resources
- were brief and undeveloped, limiting opportunities to demonstrate secure understanding

Closing comments

This question differentiated effectively between candidates who understood garden maintenance and those who understood garden management. Higher-scoring responses recognised that achieving high maintenance

standards depends not only on horticultural knowledge, but also on the effective coordination of people, equipment, materials, finances, and time.

The strongest responses demonstrated an appreciation of how these factors work together to support the long-term success of a garden.

Future candidates are advised to:

- develop their understanding of people management within horticultural organisations
- be familiar with resource planning, budgeting, and equipment management
- use practical examples from garden management to support discussion
- link management activities directly to the achievement of maintenance standards
- consider both human and physical resources when answering management questions
- practise developing balanced long-form responses that address all aspects of the question
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed

## Question 4

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of public garden management, community engagement, and stakeholder participation.

Candidates were required to evaluate the effectiveness of different methods used to engage local communities when developing public gardens.

Stronger responses achieved higher marks and included evaluation of a range of relevant points including:

- the purpose of community engagement, including improving public support, increasing local ownership, and ensuring gardens meet the needs of users
- the use of public consultations and surveys to gather opinions from a wide range of stakeholders before development begins
- the strengths and weaknesses of surveys and questionnaires
- the use of public meetings, workshops, and consultation events
- the effectiveness of opportunities for local communities to contribute directly to design decisions and planning processes
- the use of focus groups to obtain detailed feedback from specific user groups such as young people, older visitors, local residents, schools, or disability groups
- the role of social media and online engagement platforms in increasing participation and allowing feedback from individuals who may not attend meetings
- the benefits and limitations of digital engagement, recognising that some groups may be excluded through lack of access or digital confidence
- the value of volunteer programmes in developing long-term ownership and stewardship of public gardens
- the use of partnerships with schools, community groups, charities, and local organisations to broaden engagement and strengthen community links
- evaluation of different engagement methods, recognising that no single approach is effective in all situations and that multiple methods are often required

Weaker responses:

- described the visitor experience at public gardens without discussing community engagement
- described engagement activities with little or no evaluation of effectiveness
- failed to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches
- made general statements about communities without explaining how engagement contributes to successful garden development
- were brief and lacked detail
- confused community engagement during development with activities that take place after a garden has been completed

Closing comments

The strongest responses recognised that successful public gardens are often shaped through meaningful engagement with the communities they serve. Higher-scoring candidates moved beyond describing engagement methods and evaluated their effectiveness, limitations, and suitability in different situations. Responses that balanced multiple approaches and considered inclusivity, representation, and long-term community ownership achieved the highest marks.

Future candidates are advised to:

- understand the range of community engagement techniques commonly used
- be able to evaluate both the advantages and limitations of different engagement methods
- consider the needs of different stakeholder groups when discussing engagement
- use examples to support discussion wherever possible
- focus on how engagement contributes to successful outcomes for both gardens and communities.
- practise developing balanced evaluative responses rather than descriptive answers
- review their practice responses to ascertain if they demonstrate mastery of the area of the Qualification Specification being assessed