RHS Qualifications
Examiner Comments

Examination:	RHS Level 3 Certificate in the Principles of Plant Growth, Garden Planning and Applied Propagation
Unit:	Unit 2
Examination date:	16th 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

Command word	Definition
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 **garden styles and areas**, with specific reference to **alpine and rock gardens**.

Candidates were required to explain **two key design criteria** that should be considered when developing an alpine or rock garden.

Stronger responses correctly identified design criteria such as:

- site topography, for example using natural or created slopes to best effect
- site aspect, for example locating a rock garden in a sunny position
- the selection of rock appropriate to local conditions
- the placement of rocks to optimise drainage
- provision for access and maintenance in order to avoid damage to delicate plants.

Weaker responses:

- described the appearance of a rock garden rather than design criteria
- explained only one design criterion
- did not attempt this part of the question, indicating gaps in knowledge.

In the second part of the question, candidates were required to explain how **plant selection** is influenced by two types of rock garden: a **crevice garden** and a **scree bed**.

Stronger responses:

- explained that plants in crevice gardens must tolerate narrow, vertical or angled spaces between rocks, and therefore species with fine, penetrating root systems are appropriate, for example *Saxifraga* spp.
- recognised that crevice gardens provide excellent drainage, meaning drought-tolerant species are preferred, for example *Raoulia* spp.
- explained that scree beds require plants capable of anchoring into shifting substrates, favouring deep-rooted, fibrous or tap-rooted species, for example *Aubrieta* spp.
- stated that compact rosette- or mat-forming plants are well suited to scree beds as they reduce water loss and resist wind and surface instability.

Weaker responses:

- suggested that crevice gardens require plants with small root systems to reduce watering
- incorrectly stated that plants for crevice gardens should have limited root development
- suggested that scree beds require plants adapted to wet or waterlogged conditions.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they understand the **design requirements** that should be applied when developing alpine and rock gardens, rather than focusing on appearance alone. Stronger responses demonstrate clear links between site conditions, garden type and plant adaptation.

Future candidates should be able to distinguish between different types of rock garden, such as crevice gardens and scree beds, and explain how root structure, drainage tolerance, growth habit, maintenance requirements influence plant selection. Responses that use accurate horticultural terminology, and address all parts of the question clearly will achieve higher marks.

Question 2

This question assessed candidates' knowledge and understanding of **crops and crop planning**.

The question began with a scenario in which a garden was considering the use of **protective structures** to **extend the cropping season** in a **kitchen garden**.

Candidates were required to **evaluate** the potential **environmental and management trade-offs** associated with using protective structures in small-scale productive growing settings.

Stronger responses:

- evaluated the benefits of polythene tunnels in extending the growing season and protecting crops from adverse weather, against environmental concerns such as microplastic pollution and end-of-life disposal of polythene
- evaluated the energy and resource inputs associated with the manufacture of glass (or plastic films) and steel structures by considering their carbon footprint alongside their expected lifespan
- evaluated increased crop yield against potential negative impacts on biodiversity, recognising that protective structures may exclude pollinators and reduce wildlife within the garden
- evaluated management implications, including increased labour requirements for structure maintenance and irrigation, particularly in community garden settings, while also considering the potential for increased yields to offset these demands
- evaluated risk by considering the effects of high humidity and overheating during summer months on both crops and people working within these environments, and discussed appropriate mitigation measures, for example improved ventilation or irrigation systems to reduce air temperature.

Some candidates did not attempt this question, indicating gaps in knowledge and preparation.

Weaker responses:

- were descriptive rather than evaluative
- were vague or undeveloped
- contained significant factual errors, for example with regards to definitions of what a single use plastic is
- incorrectly suggested that the use of protective structures limits crop choice by allowing a narrower range of crops to be grown.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they understand the meaning of the command word **evaluate**. In this context, evaluation requires candidates to consider **both advantages and disadvantages**, and to weigh these against one another using reasoned explanation.

Stronger responses demonstrated balanced judgement by linking environmental impacts, management considerations and productivity outcomes, rather than describing protective structures in isolation. Future candidates should aim to integrate sustainability, labour, and yield considerations when discussing cropping systems.
Responses that rely on descriptions, general statements, contain factual inaccuracies, or fail to consider trade-offs will not meet the requirements of an **evaluative** question. Clear structure, accurate terminology and the use of applied examples will support higher-mark responses.

Question 3

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of the **optimisation of yield**, with specific reference to **soil fertility**.

The question began with a scenario in which candidates were asked to advise on soil improvement strategies for a new urban food-growing project established on nutrient-poor ground.

Candidates were required to explain **two distinct, named, sustainable techniques** that could be used to increase soil fertility. The application of compost or organic matter was excluded, requiring candidates to demonstrate a deeper level of understanding. The use of the term *distinct* required candidates to select **two unrelated techniques**, demonstrating breadth of knowledge and to avoid duplicated points.

Stronger responses:

- identified the use of green manures as a sustainable technique, explaining that leguminous species fix atmospheric nitrogen, increase biomass and protect soil from adverse weather conditions
- explained how crop rotation can balance nutrient demand and reduce the depletion of specific nutrients
- described minimal cultivation practices, for example no-dig systems, explaining how these promote soil biodiversity and nutrient cycling while preserving soil structure and organic layers
- explained the use of nutrient teas, for example comfrey teas, as a means of supplying essential nutrients to the root zone.

Weaker responses:

- focused on only one technique, limiting the marks available
- provided vague, undeveloped or inaccurate explanations.

Candidates were then required to state **one advantage and one limitation** of each technique in order to demonstrate deeper knowledge and understanding of the assessment outcome.

Stronger responses:

- clearly identified one relevant advantage and one relevant limitation for each technique in relation to increasing soil fertility.

Weaker responses:

- were vague or lacked development
- discussed advantages and limitations unrelated to soil fertility, for example pest or disease control.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they select **distinct and appropriate techniques** when responding to questions of this type. Where exclusions are stated in the question, **these must be followed carefully**.

Stronger responses demonstrated not only knowledge of sustainable soil improvement methods, but also an understanding of **how and why** these techniques influence soil fertility.

Candidates should ensure that advantages and limitations are directly linked to soil nutrient availability, structure or biological activity, rather than broader horticultural benefits.

Clear structure, accurate terminology and balanced explanation of benefits and limitations will support higher-mark responses.

Question 4

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **horticultural trials**.

The first part of the question required candidates to state **two specific benefits** of adopting trial results or research findings in productive growing.

Stronger responses clearly stated benefits such as:

- improved crop yield and/or quality
- enhanced resistance to pests and diseases
- increased efficiency in the use of resources, for example water, fertilisers or crop protection products
- improved crop performance or effectiveness.

The majority of candidate responses to this part of the question were strong.

The second part of the question required candidates to explain **three challenges** that may limit the adoption of trial results or research findings by growers.

Stronger responses explained that:

- the introduction of new techniques, technologies or systems often requires investment in equipment, resources or training, which may be unaffordable for smaller growers
- research findings are frequently based on specific climates, soil types or growing systems, meaning results may not transfer reliably to different locations or contexts
- growers may be reluctant to change established practices due to concerns about potential impacts on yield, quality, or customer acceptance
- growers may lack awareness of trial outcomes, or may find research findings difficult to interpret or apply in practice.

The majority of candidate responses to this part of the question were also strong.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they understand both the **value** of horticultural trials and the **practical constraints** that may limit their adoption. Stronger responses demonstrate an ability to move beyond general statements by identifying specific benefits and explaining realistic barriers faced by growers.

Candidates should focus on how trial results support evidence-based decision-making, while also recognising economic, environmental and practical factors that influence whether research can be implemented successfully.

Clear explanation, use of applied examples, and accurate terminology will support higher-mark responses.

Question 5

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **managing people in a garden setting**.

The question began with a statement recognising that garden managers are responsible for evaluating staff performance in order to support both productivity and professional development.

Candidates were required to **describe in detail one method** that a garden manager could use to evaluate staff performance.

Stronger responses:

- explained how formal appraisal systems can be used to review attendance, performance and conduct, identify training needs, set objectives and provide structured feedback
- discussed the use of peer feedback, recognising that input from colleagues can provide alternative perspectives and help build a more rounded understanding of performance and interpersonal skills
- explained how observation of staff at work enables managers to assess working practices, technical skill, efficiency, and adherence to agreed procedures or methods.

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

Weaker responses:

- discussed unrelated issues such as pay, reward systems or general motivational strategies, rather than methods of performance evaluation.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to focus carefully on the **specific requirement of the question**, which was to describe a method for evaluating staff performance. Stronger responses demonstrated a clear understanding of performance management tools and explained how these methods are used in practice to assess effectiveness, skills and development needs.
Candidates should avoid drifting into related but separate topics, such as pay or motivation, unless these are clearly linked to evaluation.

Responses that provide **detailed explanation of one appropriate method**, rather than brief mention of several, are more likely to achieve higher marks. Clear structure applied examples and accurate use of management terminology will support stronger responses.

Question 6

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **maintenance standards**.

Candidates were required to outline how **visitor feedback** can be used to set and improve quality standards in a public or heritage garden.

Stronger responses stated:

- that structured feedback systems can be used to close the loop between garden management and the public
- that visitor surveys, comment cards and digital platforms can be used to gather data on visitor satisfaction and needs
- that managers should review feedback regularly and adapt planting, layout or maintenance activities such as weed control in response
- that publishing actions taken in response to feedback helps build trust and loyalty with visitors
- that feedback should be gathered from a range of stakeholders, including visitors, volunteers and staff
- that specific feedback can be used to inform measurable quality standards, for example prioritising weed control in high-use areas or introducing regular checks to ensure plant labels are present and accurate.

Weaker responses:

- were vague or undeveloped
- identified feedback mechanisms, such as signage, without considering how this information can be used to set standards
- discussed benchmarking against other gardens without linking this to visitor feedback.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they fully address the **specific requirements of the question**. In this instance, many candidates lost marks through **omission**, particularly by failing to answer the question and explain how visitor feedback is used to set, review and improve maintenance standards.

Weaker responses often remained at a **basic or descriptive level**, identifying feedback mechanisms without demonstrating the **technical understanding and applied decision-making** required at Level 3.

Stronger responses showed how feedback data is analysed, prioritised and translated into measurable standards and management actions.

Candidates should also ensure that responses reflect **Level 3 technical knowledge**, using appropriate terminology and demonstrating how quality standards are developed, implemented and monitored within professional garden management. Clear structure, applied examples and explicit links between feedback and maintenance standards are essential for achieving higher marks.

Question 7

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **equality and diversity** in relation to the **management of gardens**.

Candidates were required to discuss how effective management of equality and diversity principles can contribute to a **high-quality visitor experience** in public gardens.

This question was poorly answered by the majority of candidates, indicating gaps in teaching and insufficient preparation for the examination.

Many responses were vague, anecdotal, undeveloped or incorrect, and a significant proportion did not address the requirements of the question.

To provide additional guidance to candidates and centres, the marking scheme included a range of indicative content. Candidates were not expected to cover all of these points; they are provided to illustrate the breadth and depth of responses that could be credited and to demonstrate alignment with the Qualification Specification.
Indicative content included reference to:

- full compliance with equality and diversity legislation within garden management
- a proactive commitment to inclusivity across all aspects of garden operations
- ensuring staff, volunteers and visitors are treated with dignity and respect
- embedding equality and diversity principles within all management activities, including preventing harassment, victimisation and discrimination
- training staff in equality and diversity so principles are applied consistently in both garden management and visitor engagement

At Level 3, candidates are expected to demonstrate the ability to **apply** these principles to practical contexts, as required by the question. The mark scheme therefore included the following concepts:

- ensuring displays, events, marketing materials and signage reflect diverse cultural perspectives.
- enabling access for all visitors, for example reviewing where steps or changes in level restrict wheelchair access
- providing seating at appropriate intervals to support older visitors or those with limited mobility
- managing busy areas, such as cafés, by offering quieter periods or spaces to support neurodivergent visitors.

Closing comments

Future candidates are reminded that success at **Level 3** depends not only on demonstrating a knowledge of syllabus content, but on the ability to **integrate, apply and adapt that knowledge** to the specific demands of the question. Candidates are expected to demonstrate secure understanding of key concepts, principles and terminology from across the whole syllabus, and to use this knowledge flexibly in response to unfamiliar scenarios.

Many candidates lost marks by relying on general statements or by reproducing isolated pieces of knowledge without showing how these applied to the situation described. At Level 3, responses must move beyond recall and description to show **reasoned application**, clear links between concepts, and an understanding of *why* particular approaches are appropriate.

Centres and candidates are therefore advised to ensure that preparation for the examination includes both coverage of the full syllabus content and opportunities to practise applying that knowledge in context. High-scoring responses to questions of this nature would demonstrate mastery by integrating relevant ideas, using accurate technical language, and addressing the question directly and purposefully.

The ability to think critically, apply learning to new situations, and construct a coherent, well-supported response is a key distinguishing feature of performance 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 **how trees are used within gardens**.

Candidates were required to produce a long-form response to the following question:
Compare and contrast how trees are used in formal versus informal gardens.

Candidates were further instructed to consider **tree selection, spatial arrangement and seasonal interest**, and to explain how these elements contribute to the intended character of formal and informal gardens.

This was not a popular question. However, candidates who did attempt it generally achieved high marks, most commonly within **Band 3 and Band 4**.

These responses included:

- explanations of how trees are used to create geometric layouts in formal gardens, for example avenues and parterres
- discussions relating to the use of clipping and training in formal gardens, including topiary (e.g. *Taxus baccata*) and pleaching (e.g. *Tilia cordata*)
- explanations that informal gardens often use asymmetrical, flowing arrangements that mimic natural woodland patterns
- discussions around the layering of trees with shrubs and herbaceous planting in informal gardens to enhance biodiversity and visual depth
- recognition that mature trees can anchor a design, providing structure, habitat value and a sense of long-term planning
- discussions relating to slow-growing, easily pruned and uniform species suitable for formal gardens, for example the use of *Carpinus betulus* 'Fastigiata' to frame views
- explanation of how seasonal interest, such as spring blossom and autumn colour in informal gardens (e.g. *Amelanchier lamarckii*), contributes to visitor enjoyment
- recognition that trees in formal gardens are often used to divide space and define boundaries
- consideration of visitor experience, for example how shaded avenues in formal gardens can shape movement, mood and comfort during summer months.

There were no weak responses to this question.

Closing comments

Candidates who selected this question demonstrated strong performance by engaging fully with the **compare and contrast** requirement and by integrating knowledge of planting design, spatial arrangement and seasonal interest. High-scoring responses showed clear understanding of how tree choice and placement contribute to the distinct character of formal and informal gardens.

Future candidates are advised that success in long-form questions at Level 3 depends on the ability to **compare approaches directly**, rather than describing each in isolation. Stronger responses consistently linked design intent to plant selection and visitor experience, using accurate terminology and well-chosen examples. Clear structure, balanced comparison and applied understanding are key features of high-band responses.

Question 2

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **productive growing**, with specific reference to the use of **raised beds**.

Candidates were required to explain the reasons behind the popularity of raised beds, discussing both the **key advantages** and **potential limitations** they provide.

This was a popular question choice among candidates.

Stronger responses:

- explained how raised beds allow more effective management of soil structure and fertility
- linked improved drainage to increased soil temperature, enabling earlier cropping in spring
- recognised that improved structure, drainage and soil temperature can allow a wider range of crops to be grown
- explained how raised beds enable production on challenging sites, including rooftops, hard surfaces, compacted soils and nutrient-poor situations
- discussed how physical pest barriers can be more easily installed on raised beds
- considered the wider role of raised beds in community and therapeutic horticultural settings
- evaluated the cost implications of constructing raised beds
- discussed sustainability considerations, including the environmental impact of materials used
- considered rooting depth, explaining how deep-rooted crops may grow beyond the improved soil layer into poorer underlying conditions, potentially affecting crop quality
- discussed increased irrigation requirements from both labour and sustainability perspectives.

Weaker responses:

- were unfocused and referred to ornamental rather than productive growing contexts
- specified the use of materials such as railway sleepers without addressing health and safety or contamination risks
- demonstrated confusion around water use, for example stating that raised beds are well drained, require less water, but also need increased irrigation
- were very brief, omitting the depth of explanation required at Level 3.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they demonstrate **secure technical knowledge** when answering questions at Level 3. Many candidates lost marks through **omission** or by providing short, undeveloped responses that did not fully address both advantages and limitations, as required by the question.

At Level 3, candidates are expected to show a detailed understanding of the **relevant assessment outcomes.** Candidates should aim to structure their answers clearly, ensuring that all elements of the question are addressed in detail and that explanations are supported by accurate terminology, consideration of underpinning concepts and applied examples. High scoring candidates demonstrated breadth and depth of understanding, alongside clear evaluation of benefits and limitations.

Question 3

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **the management of material resources in the garden**.

Candidates were required to critically evaluate how poor resource management can affect the maintenance of a named garden area.

This was not a popular question.

In this question, *critically evaluate* means that candidates must do more than describe what poor resource management looks like.

Candidates were expected to:

- **identify and name a specific garden area** (for example, an herbaceous border, productive garden, heritage lawn, or woodland edge)
- use **technical horticultural knowledge** to explain how poor management of resources (such as labour, water, finance, equipment, materials, or skills) affects maintenance outcomes
- consider **both the impacts and any mitigating factors**, weighing up strengths and weaknesses
- reach a **reasoned judgement**, supported by evidence, about the overall effect on maintenance quality.

Balanced discussion, clear application, and justified conclusions are essential for higher marks in questions of this nature.

Stronger responses were expected to demonstrate a clear understanding of what is meant by **poor resource management**, for example inadequate staffing, insufficient budgets, poor scheduling, or inefficient use of materials. Candidates were expected to select an appropriate **named garden area** and explain, using technical horticultural language, how such limitations affected maintenance standards.

High-scoring responses would be achieved by evaluating impacts such as declining plant health, reduced maintenance standards, increased weed pressure, soil degradation, or compromised visitor experience, while also considering how prioritisation or mitigation strategies might reduce some negative effects.

Weaker responses often remained **basic or descriptive**, outlining general problems without evaluating their significance or impact. Some candidates failed to name a garden area, while others listed issues without explaining how these affected maintenance outcomes. Some responses showed limited technical understanding, or focused on opinion rather than evidence-based judgement.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they understand that *critical evaluation* at Level 3 requires more than a simple description, or the expression of opinion. Responses should integrate technical horticultural knowledge with clear application to a specific garden area, demonstrating how and why poor resource management affects

maintenance quality. Candidates who address both positive and negative aspects, support points with relevant examples, and reach a justified conclusion are more likely to achieve higher marks.

Question 4

This question assessed candidates' applied knowledge and understanding of **horticultural interventions to enhance wellbeing**, with specific reference to **nature-based therapy**.

Candidates were required to respond to the question:
Explain how and why gardens are often created as spaces for nature-based therapy.

Candidates were further required to **describe what nature-based therapy involves**, **discuss how gardens can support specific aspects of physical wellbeing**, and **use examples to support their responses**.

This was a popular question, with some candidates achieving the maximum award of 15 marks.

Stronger responses:

- addressed the question accurately and in full
- clearly defined nature-based therapies
- provided relevant, well-chosen examples
- explicitly linked examples to nature-based therapeutic approaches
- explained how gardens support specific aspects of physical wellbeing
- demonstrated a high level of insight and detail, with responses remaining tightly focused on the requirements of the question.

Weaker responses:

- were vague and discussed gardening in general terms as beneficial to health
- were descriptive, outlining services or activities without addressing how or why gardens are designed for therapy
- did not discuss how gardens can support nature-based therapy activities
- did not distinguish between gardening activities and structured nature-based therapy
- were brief and undeveloped.

Closing comments

Future candidates are advised to ensure they understand the **distinction between general gardening activities and nature-based therapy**. At Level 3, candidates are expected to demonstrate applied understanding by explaining **how and why** gardens are intentionally designed and managed to support therapeutic outcomes.

Many candidates lost marks through **omission or lack of focus**, particularly by failing to define nature-based therapy or by not linking examples directly to physical wellbeing. Stronger responses integrated clear definitions with applied examples, showing how specific garden features or interventions support therapeutic aims.

Candidates should ensure they address **all parts of the question**, use accurate terminology, and apply their knowledge to the context provided. Responses that demonstrate integration, application, and clear reasoning are more likely to achieve higher marks at Level 3.