RHS Qualifications

Examination: RHS Level 3
Unit: Unit 2
Examination date: October 24

General Introductory Comments

Examiners' comments are produced by RHS Qualifications following each examination series.

The Examiner's comments included in this report are intended to help candidates and centres to develop an understanding of the requirements of the RHS Level 3 examinations. This is achieved through a review of candidate responses indicating key areas of strength, while also considering areas where candidates demonstrated a weaker understanding of Topic areas, or where there was evidence of gaps in their knowledge. It should be noted that the Level 3 October examination series has attracted a lower number of candidates than the February and June examination series. The lower number of candidates limits the range of candidate responses that are discussed in this report.

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 candidates should:

- demonstrate factual, procedural, and theoretical 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
- review how effective methods and actions have been
- demonstrate responsibility for supervising or guiding others.

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To be able to achieve higher scores, candidates at Level 3 should be able to:

- 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 2.

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

The October 2024 examination series attracted a low number of candidates.

An analysis of scripts has indicated that there were no strong candidate responses, with candidates being graded as either pass or fail.

Candidates are advised that at Level 3 they should have a thorough knowledge of Unit 2 and Qualification – wide outcomes that are assessed in this examination. Candidates are expected to be able to:

- read and interpret information
- demonstrate a secure knowledge of UK legislation as it relates to horticultural practices
- summarise key concepts and ideas
- evaluate and apply horticultural practices
- discuss horticultural concepts from a range of informed perspectives
- apply their horticultural knowledge to new scenarios and situations
- provide full, detailed and well-structured long form responses in Section C
- integrate relevant Qualification-wide outcomes into long form responses
- provide logical responses
- develop coherent fact-based arguments.

Qualification specification and Guidance Document

The Qualification specification outlines the curriculum that candidates will be examined on. A Guidance Document is freely available from Quartz and RHS Qualifications. This document was developed to provide centres with additional guidance with regards to the interpretation of the Assessment Outcomes in terms of breadth and depth that is appropriate to a Level 3 qualification.

It should be noted that the Guidance Document is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to teaching and learning. Instead, it is designed to provide examples of some of the key areas contained within an Assessment Outcome. As an example, where an Assessment Outcome in the Qualification Specification formally lists five areas that should be included, the Guidance Document may only unpack one of these areas as an example. The centre is then expected to apply the same level of breadth and depth provided in the exemplar to the other areas defined in the Assessment Outcome.

This document is updated annually each autumn.

RHS Qualifications will be publishing further guidance relating to Section C, (long form candidate responses) in early 2025. This document will include examples of high scoring candidate responses, along with an analysis of the attributes of a high scoring response.

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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 required candidates to state four advantages of certified organic production when compared to traditional growing systems used in horticulture.

Stronger candidate responses included:

- soil health is enhanced by organic production
- biodiversity is enhanced by organic production
- reduced carbon footprint
- avoidance of unsustainable synthetic fertilisers
- increased soil fauna, for example earthworms

Weaker candidate responses contained vague or incorrect information, repeated points, or contained information that was not relevant to the question.

Question 2

This question required candidates to describe four ways that garden areas can be designed to promote social inclusion.

Stronger candidate responses included:

- accessibility, for example paths that are designed to accommodate wheelchair and pushchair users
- signage, should be representative of the cultures of the people using the garden, and in their first language to ensure inclusion
- productive areas could grow a range of crops familiar to all members of the community
- Inclusive interpretation, including use of sign language, braille, or audio to remove barriers of communication
- play areas for children, including those with a disability or those who are neurodiverse.

Weaker candidate responses included:

- the provision of allotments for local communities
- entrances to gardens should be easy to find
- a review of existing signage

The weaker candidate responses were either off topic, (provision of allotments) or did not contain the required level of technical detail, for example by stating the criteria that could be used when carrying out a review of existing signage.

Question 3

This question required candidates to demonstrate their knowledge of the management of trees in gardens and designed landscapes.

Part a) required the candidate to explain the terms pollarding and crown raising.

Stronger candidate responses fully and correctly explained the terms.

In part b) candidates were required to explain, with reference to climate change, why arborists recommend these procedures.

Strong candidate responses included:

- reducing storm damage by reducing the sail effect
- the provision of accessible shade for garden visitors in hotter summers
- improving the safety and stability of trees in high wind events.

Weaker candidate responses often contained incorrect material, for example, suggesting pollarding increases the tree's ability to sequester carbon, or increase water uptake to reduce the risk of flooding.

Question 4

Part a) of this question required candidates to list three alternative power sources for garden equipment.

Strong candidate responses correctly listed three alternative power sources to include:

- mains electricity
- battery
- human power
- bio fuel

Weaker candidates offered responses that were technically incorrect, for example stating LED batteries, rather than Lithium-ion batteries.

Part b) of the question required candidates to select the most sustainable option of the three alternative power sources stated, and to justify their selection.

Stronger candidates correctly identified and fully justified the most sustainable option.

Weaker candidates did not choose the most sustainable option from their selection.

A common error was to select mains electric over battery power when a more sustainable option was part of the candidates three power sources. (It is fully accepted that mains power is more sustainable than battery), however if a more sustainable third option was given then this should have been used in the candidate response. For example, where mains electricity, battery, and human power were stated in a) the correct response in b) would be human power. This would make mains electricity incorrect as a response.

This demonstrates the importance of candidates thinking through and applying their knowledge, rather than the simple recall of facts.

Question 5

This question contained a scenario, which candidates had to respond to, relating to the development of a new garden area.

Candidates were required to state five checks that they would make to ensure a new garden area complies with the overall management plan for the whole garden.

Strong candidates suggested a wide range of checks that should be made, including:

- hard landscaping materials should be in accordance with the aims and objectives of the garden management plan
- inclusion should be in accordance with the aims and objectives of the garden management plan
- accessibility should be in accordance with the aims and objectives of the garden management plan
- the new area should not conflict with the organic principles of the rest of the garden
- opportunities to showcase organic principles such as companion planting should be included
- the garden should embrace sustainability Best Practice, for example utilising rainwater capture.

Weaker candidate responses were either vague, undeveloped or did not reflect the requirement of the question, for example:

- the use of plant records to catalogue collections
- the frequency of operations
- the use of Gantt charts to schedule timings.

Question 6

For this question candidates were provided with background information taken from the Safety Data Sheet for the horticultural disinfectant Propellar.
No additional knowledge of Propellar was required by candidates.

Part a) of the question required candidates to state what the acronym COSHH stands for.

The correct answer was Control of Substances Hazardous to Health.
Some incorrect responses were not complete, for example, C of Substances Hazardous to Health.

Part b) of this question required candidates to review the provided data to state three storage consideration of the product.

Candidates who reviewed the safety information, and then stated the requirements, scored full marks. Candidates who supplied their own information, which did not relate to the provided information scored lower marks.

Part c) of this question required candidates to state the action that should be taken if the product is spilt onto clothing.

All candidates correctly responded to this question.

Part d) of this question required candidates to state two pieces of PPE that should be worn when using the product.

All candidates correctly responded to this question.

Question 7

This question required the candidate to explain how, within a productive growing environment, continuity of supply can be ensured.

Stronger candidate responses included justified discussions relating to:

- successional sowing
- use of different cultivars to provide early, mid-season and late cropping
- use of Gantt charts to plan continuity of supply
- the use of protective structures, such as cloches to extend the season
- the use of perennial vegetables that can be harvested all year round
- the propagation of young plants in glasshouses, for early plantings.

Weaker candidate responses often contained vague, or undeveloped responses, for example, 'to ensure continuity of supply during the hungry gap' (spring) without explaining how this can be achieved. Other weaker responses included explanations of crop rotation systems, which were not relevant to the question.

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Question 8

This question was designed to assess the candidate's integrated knowledge of hard landscapes, sustainability and climate resilience. Candidates were required to explain, with reference to a supplied quotation, how paved areas can be developed to make gardens more climate resilient.

There were no strong candidate responses to this question.

Questions of this nature require candidates to make a considered response to a question, allowing them to apply their integrated knowledge of topic areas. Often questions of this nature will ask candidates to apply their knowledge to new or novel situations, to think through and apply core principles.

The mark scheme suggested a number of areas that candidates could have included within their responses. Not all were required to achieve high marks, as the technical content was considered in conjunction with the strength of argument.

Candidate responses could have included:

- the use of textured surfaces to reduce slip risk from increased rainfall and algal growth.
- the avoidance of pale coloured materials to reduce reflection due to increases in light levels
- reducing the size and scale of paved areas to reduce reflection, and to reduce run off during high rainfall events
- the incorporation of SuDS principles to include installation of permeable surfaces to prevent run off and allow water percolation, reducing water leaving the site
- the diversion of water run-off from paved areas to rain gardens or swales
- the lifting of occasional slabs to plant trees to provide shade.

Weaker candidates provided vague and undeveloped responses, for example stating that hard landscaped areas should be well designed and installed; or discussed irrelevant areas such as the carbon footprint of materials.

It is recommended that to prepare for future examinations, centres provide candidates with the opportunity to practice responding to questions where knowledge and understanding of topic areas is applied to new scenarios. This application of knowledge to provide answers in new contexts is a fundamental requirement of assessment at Level 3.

Section C

Section C candidate responses are graded against the assessment ladder, which is on the next page of this report. (This is the same ladder that is used in the Level 2 examinations.) Candidates and centres are advised to review the ladder as this indicates how the assessment decisions are made, when grading long form responses.

Candidate performance in Section C ranges from those candidates who:

- demonstrated their factual, procedural and theoretical knowledge
- were able to interpret, evaluate and apply relevant information and ideas
- were prepared to produce long form responses
- could discuss relevant points from a range of perspectives
- could discuss a range of approaches
- approached the question logically
- demonstrated a full and holistic knowledge of the topic areas and Qualification-wide outcomes
- demonstrated mastery of the areas being assessed.

through to candidates who:

- produced brief responses which lacked the required level of detail
- provided responses which were unplanned and unstructured
- provided responses that gave a framework, but which did not provide the required level of detail
- picked up on certain words in the question, and wrote all they knew about these words, rather than answering the question.

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

Indicative content

- Strength of response
- Integration
- Horticultural knowledge.

Strength of response

Strong candidate responses:

- developed a logical argument to answer the question
- drew on reliable information sources
- were relevant to the question
- expressed clarity of thought
- demonstrated knowledge of horticultural practices.

Integration

Candidate responses should integrate 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 popular question was designed to assess candidate's knowledge with regards to the creation of ecological gardens, with an associated plant knowledge.

Candidate responses to this question were graded as being within Bands 1, 2 and 3.

Stronger candidate responses:

- were detailed
- were comprehensive
- contained mostly relevant observations
- discussed the core concept of developing functioning plant communities
- developed the concept of planting in layers
- discussed how Best Practice from research papers could be applied
- specified plantings to create habitat
- suggested the use of soft, flowing natural plantings
- suggested a wide range of plant examples, discussing and justifying their inclusion.

Weaker candidate responses included:

- an awareness of the general principles
- undeveloped points
- few observations
- limited plant examples
- limited development of points.

Question 2

This question required candidates to evaluate a range of irrigation strategies to optimise yield in productive gardens.

Candidate responses to this question were graded as being within Band 1 and Band 2.

The command word 'evaluate' required candidates to 'use their own knowledge and understanding, to consider evidence for and against when making basic decisions' in this case with regards to irrigation strategies.

Candidate responses often included consideration of irrigation methods to include:

- hand watering
- use of hosepipes
- overhead sprinklers
- drip irrigation
- soaker hose.

However, the candidate responses reported on above did not evaluate, or discuss:

- the role of irrigation to optimise yield.

  the impact of water stress on plants and yield to include:
  - germination
  - establishment
  - nutrient uptake
  - reduced vigour
  - abortion of flowers/fruit
  - increased susceptibility to pests and diseases.

- factors that impact on irrigation strategy:
  - the crop being cultivated
  - water management
  - cultivar selection.

- key points relating to the effective application of irrigation:
  - sowing
  - establishment
  - flowering
  - bulking up.

- sustainability and alternatives to water application, for example mulching etc.

- soil water management using a water balance sheet.

The failure to include the above concepts demonstrates gaps in candidate knowledge, or teaching. It is recommended that candidates practice answering examination questions to allow them to develop the skills of essay planning, providing a framework for their responses, and then developing this framework to demonstrate mastery of the topic.

Question 3

This question was not attempted by candidates.

The question required candidates to discuss how maintenance plans for gardens can be used to enable the effective management of resources.

In the absence of candidate responses, the mark scheme is included to help centres prepare candidates for questions of this nature in future examinations.

The candidate defines the term maintenance plan to include:

- the zoning of gardens
- the maintenance standard for each area, i.e. numbers of cuts and maximum lengths for extension growth on hedges
- the impact of maintenance standards and available resources.

The concept that there are British Standards to inform the development of these plans to define standards for turf etc. could be stated or discussed.

The concept that the maintenance plan allows a strategic overview of tasks and times, to allow appropriate tasks to be scheduled for times when labour is more available should be unpacked and discussed.

The concept of using Gantt charts to inform the above decisions can be included.

The concept of rates of work/speed of work/training/efficiency/mechanisation of process could be introduced and discussed/evaluated.

The concept that maintenance plans allow for the review of Best Practice, new methods of working, the adoption or trial of new machinery could be discussed.

The concept that maintenance plans allow for the consideration of sizes of areas, or ways that garden features can be changed to make maintenance more efficient, for example the reduction in the height of hedges to eliminate the need for platforms.

The concept that maintenance plans allow for the development of data-based arguments relating to the recruitment of additional staff, the need to outsource work at key pinch points.

Candidate responses could integrate with a number of Topic and Qualification-wide areas to demonstrate integrated knowledge and understanding:

- Health and Safety
- Sustainability
- Best Practice
- Garden Styles and Specialist Areas
- Productive Growing
- Gardens, People and Spaces.

Candidate responses should:

- develop a logical argument to answer the question
- draw on reliable information sources
- be relevant to the question
- express clarity of thought
- demonstrate knowledge of horticultural practices.

Question 4

This question required candidates to demonstrate knowledge and mastery of benchmarking to establish Best Practice with regards to pre-visit information. This information should then be applied to explain what pre-visit information should be available to the public, to inform their visit to a large public garden. Candidates were also required to demonstrate a knowledge of how pre-visit information can be evaluated.

Candidate responses to this popular question were graded as being in Band 3 and Band 4.

Candidate responses to this question were strong, detailed and well considered.

One of the candidate responses, which was graded at the high end of Band 4, will be discussed in detail in the Guidance Document being prepared by RHS Qualifications to provide further guidance to centres on the conduct and assessment of questions within section C.

Key areas of strength relating to pre-visit information included:

- demonstrating understanding and mastery of benchmarking as a management tool and Best Practice
- provision of garden information in a variety of formats to include print and online
- planned opening times, along with information relating to road closures
- ticket purchasing/prices
- details of concessions, for example discounts, or free entry for carers
- information for group bookings
- meeting points
- facilities, i.e. baby changing
- information relating to access for pets, e.g. dogs
- information for visitors with additional needs
- 'looking good lists' to highlight key areas of garden/plant interest.

Key areas of strength relating to the evaluation of pre-visit information included:

- collection and evaluation of feedback on the website
- use of data collection services, such as Survey Monkey
- use of QR codes linked to data collection services, such as Survey Monkey
- use of staff to carry out exit interviews on guests
- use of benchmarking
- development of key performance indicators/standards.