

Since beginning my RHS Level 2 Horticultural Apprenticeship at Fulham Palace in March 2025, I've experienced a hugely rewarding spring. The opportunity to learn in such a beautiful and historically significant setting has already allowed me to develop a wide range of horticultural skills, from propagation and vegetable growing to garden renovation and machinery handling. This report summarizes the key activities I've undertaken and reflects on the many things I've learned so far.

### Propagation

One of my main focuses this spring has been seasonal propagation, particularly seed sowing, pricking out, and potting on. While these might seem like basic tasks, they've provided a strong foundation for understanding how to optimize germination rates and improve efficiency in the glasshouse. I've also had the chance to sow a variety of seeds that were new to me, including some interesting cut flower varieties.

Additionally, I've begun learning about taking cuttings. I was lucky to assist with cuttings for the Bishop Compton plant collection, guided by HBGT trainee Jonathan. While I've only just started on softwood and semi-ripe cuttings, I'm excited to continue learning these specialist skills from our Head Gardener, Lucy.



(Setting up to sow brassicas)

### Kitchen Garden Responsibilities

A significant part of my apprenticeship involves vegetable growing in the walled garden. The space is managed collaboratively between me, Jonathan, and gardener Lewis,

each responsible for different sections. I've been assigned brassicas, leaves, the fruit cage, and first/early potatoes.

Despite having several years of allotment experience, working on a larger-scale formal project has taught me invaluable lessons. For example, I've learned new techniques for organic pest control and companion planting something I'm very fond of—recently treating cabbage mealy aphids with an organic garden friendly product SB invigorator that smothers the pests.

Our volunteer team has also helped with large-scale tasks like potato planting, earthing up, and weeding. The brassicas are thriving, and my leaf crops (lettuce, pak choi, and chard) are looking healthy and vigorous. Fruit in the cage is ripening well, and I'm proud of the high-quality crops that are produced and sold on our very own market barrow.



(Cabbages, potato planting, and potatoes in all their glory)

### **Knot Garden Renovation**

One of the most exciting projects has been the restoration of the historic Knot Garden. When I began, the existing *Buxus sempervirens* box hedging was in poor condition due to infestation from box tree caterpillar. Removing the plants and preparing the beds was hard work but incredibly satisfying. During this process, I gained valuable insight into soil structure, the importance of organic matter incorporation, and bed renovation.

As a team, we visited RHS Wisley to see *Podocarpus* 'Green Gem' and *P. Chocolate Box* — our chosen box replacements —being trialed. Shortly after, a thousand new plants arrived, and planting began. Watching the garden evolve has been a one of many highlights of my placement, and I'm proud to be part of the project.



(Old box removed, podocarpus at wisley and podocarpus arriving at the palace)

### **General Maintenance and Machinery Use**

Daily site maintenance has been another key part of my apprenticeship, including tasks like weeding, raking, deadheading, edging, and mulching—all essential to maintaining a high horticultural standard. I've also assisted with lawn care, pathway tidying and litter picking, helping ensure the site remains welcoming and tidy.

Under the guidance of senior gardener Pete, I've been trained to use a range of machinery, including push and ride-on mowers, blowers, and strimmers. I understand the importance of safe operation and maintenance and now feel much more confident with these essential tools. I'm also responsible for watering, weather tracking, and overseeing livestock, including the garden's chickens and our cat, Pamunkey. These responsibilities are rotated throughout the team.

### **Market Barrow and Events**

Managing the market barrow has taught me skills in harvesting, display, flower arranging, and customer service.

I also took part in the *green meet*, a public event celebrating sustainability. I supported the cut flower stall and helped with site preparation and stall set-up.

## Learning and Plant Identification

Learning Latin plant names is a skill I've been working on through weekly plant ID tests. My scores have ranged from 60% to 100%, and although it's a challenge, I'm committed to improving my plant naming skills. Alongside this, I've kept an **online dairy** to reflect on tasks and track my development, in line with the expectations of the apprenticeship. This has ranged from my own social media page (Horticulture\_by\_Ellis) to my blog on the website and a huge bank of pictures along the way.

## Biodiversity and Sustainability

I've taken part in activities focused on wildlife and biodiversity, including a wild bee survey and participating in a honeybee workshop. I've helped care for our wildlife pond, heritage fruit trees, and learned about composting on a large scale, including different mixes for specific plant needs.

I've also had the opportunity to support the Bishop Compton plant collection, and working with drought-tolerant species that represent the future of British gardening.



(surveying bees with specialist and wildlife pond)

## Team and Personal Development

One of the best aspects of my apprenticeship is working alongside a passionate team of gardeners, volunteers, *get into gardening* trainees and work experience placements.

The learning environment at Fulham Palace is encouraging and collaborative. I've been supported in developing new skills while being given the responsibility to grow independently.

## **Conclusion**

In just a few months, I've learned an enormous amount—not just about plants and horticulture, but about working as part of a professional team and managing a historic site. The practical skills I've developed align closely with the role expectations, from plant care and propagation to machinery use, biodiversity support, and public interaction.

Looking forward, I feel incredibly excited about what the rest of the apprenticeship holds. I'm eager to deepen my understanding, take on new challenges, and continue contributing. The future feels very positive, and I'm grateful to be learning from such experienced horticulturists in a place with such rich history and potential.

With Many Thanks to the Denny Trust,

Ellis Lewis