



**Jo Shepherd**  
Horticulture

➔ **What inspired you to become a Skills Coach, and what do you enjoy most about supporting apprentices?**



I think apprenticeships are a fantastic way for young people to gain knowledge, whilst working and developing practical experience. It is quite common for my Apprentices to say at interview that they didn't enjoy sitting in a classroom at school or college and they chose a career outdoors for the same reason. This can be a challenge, but I enjoy getting to know them and working out the best way to help them achieve. It's incredibly rewarding to see an apprentice progress from feeling nervous and unsure at the start to becoming more confident, taking initiative, sharing their knowledge at work and achieving a qualification that takes effort and commitment. Watching that transformation is what makes my job so worthwhile.

↓ **How do you support apprentices in balancing workplace demands with their studies?**



I tell my Apprentices that they should treat being at college like being at work, they are being paid after all! They shouldn't need to do any homework as long as they make full use of their time at college. The Apprenticeship is a real collaboration with the employer, apprentice and skills coach and the three of us get together for regular formal reviews to see how things are going. This is a great opportunity to address any concerns at work or at college and we make a plan to work together to overcome any concerns. I encourage open communication all the way and this seems to be a good strategy for managing many of the pressures that life throws at us.

➔ **What's one piece of advice you always share with apprentices to help them make the most of their training?**



Don't stop learning when you leave classroom, ask questions at work, talk to other team members and Apprentices. Listen to podcasts, watch YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, there is so much content and Gardener's World is not the only option anymore! Find something you are interested in and go and find out more.

↓ **What experience and expertise do you bring to your role that helps apprentices succeed in their chosen industry?**



Many of my Apprentices have come straight from school or college, but there are also many who are on a second or third career. That is what happened to me. I grew up in the countryside and was selling home grown strawberries at the end of my road as a child. I loved nature and being outdoors, but I never considered a career in horticulture and instead went to university, moved to London and then spent the next ten years abroad.

When I came back to the UK I really enjoyed working in my own garden and I started working for some local garden designers. I was inspired by their designs and planting combinations and enjoyed looking after the gardens once we had planted them. I completed the RHS Level 2 to gain the knowledge to back up the skills I was learning at work and at home. I loved working in horticulture and wanted to see what else was out there, so I spent a summer working in a trade nursery specialising in herbaceous perennials. I also took a garden design course and designed a few gardens. At about this time one of my children attended BCA and I was so impressed with the college and how they offer support to students who may not necessarily follow the traditional path through education. I started working in the horticulture department alongside one of the lecturers and it opened my eyes to an opportunity I had never considered before, working in Apprenticeships. I have really enjoyed completing my RHS Level 3 since working at BCA and am very lucky to have a great team with lots of different skills and areas of expertise to draw on. I love that the Apprenticeship uses my business skills, my horticulture skills and my support skills and no two days are ever the same.

➔ **What achievement—either your own career success or a learner's success—are you most proud of?**



I am a big fan of resilience and feel a lot of admiration for anyone who overcomes the challenges that life throws at them. Since taking on the role of Skills coach in 2022, in my groups there have been a few injuries, illnesses, redundancies, personal losses and disappointments. Those times can be tough, but seeing apprentices come through that to find a new employer, pass their PA1, achieve their maths functional skills, receive great feedback about a task they have completed at work (from a perfectly striped lawn to an exhibit at a flower show) or achieve their qualification with a distinction and go on to get a promotion or a new role within the industry, that all makes me feel proud and grateful to be doing this job.

