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The WOMAN UP Issue

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Today female role models in horticulture and garden design are all around us, on our screens and in magazines, but historically women gardeners faced discrimination, often relegated to menial tasks like weeding. They were even viewed with suspicion in medieval times for fear they might poison the garden. Opportunities to train were scarce until the advent of women's horticultural colleges at Swanley, Studley, Glynde and Waterperry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1896, Kew Gardens hired its first female gardeners who famously had to wear brown woollen bloomers, so they didn't distract their male colleagues. Having trained at Swanley Horticultural College, these women were given equal pay. Later, in WWII, Kew employed 50 female gardeners to replace enlisted men. An article in *Illustrated Magazine* in 1942, somewhat condescendingly, nicknamed them 'Kewties'



– but these female horticultural trailblazers paved the way for future generations. Today Cambridge University Botanic Garden has a largely female management team led by Director Professor Beverley Glover. I interviewed Sally Pettit, Head of Horticulture at the garden, about her career and how horticulture is changing. Sally joined in 1988 as a trainee horticultural technician for one year and has stayed ever since. "I chose not to do an HND at horticultural college," she says, "and my traineeship here was extended to three years on the condition I completed a City and Guilds qualification at Milton College." Sally was then encouraged to apply for a role by a female colleague who was leaving. She was set to work in the herbaceous Woodland section and looked after the Chronological Beds and Scented Garden.

Sally later moved into the Alpine section, calling it a 'seminal moment' which led to extraordinary experiences. In 1998 she joined an expedition to Pakistan. "We were based in Baltistan in the Plains of Deosai, 4,000 metres up in the Himalayas which was just mind-blowing," she says. "The remote tundra landscape had amazing alpine. I joined another incredible expedition to China in 2000, all made possible by looking after the alpine collection here."

Sally now heads up a team of 27 horticulturists. She's the director of the Cambridge Certificate in Botanical Horticulture, the one-year traineeship, so popular it gets between 80 and 100 applications for just nine places. Of this year's intake, four trainees are women. "I love how my role has come full circle," she says, "from being a trainee myself, to training the horticulturists of tomorrow."



GROWING OPPORTUNITIES

As we celebrate International Women's Day, Velvet's Melanie Taylor learns about the careers of two of Cambridge's female Head Gardeners – and how they nurture both the city's green spaces and the next generation of horticultural talent

We're very focused on education and engagement with trails and short courses. Last year 9,500 pupils visited us, and we hope everyone leaves inspired." If Sally had a crystal ball, how would horticulture and the Botanic Garden change in future? "There's going to be a shift, if we're not experiencing it already," she says, "because climate change means we need to safeguard the future of our gardens. I think historically, horticulture has been experimental, and that keeps it fresh. "If we had 40 acres here that never changed since 1846 it would be a very static environment wouldn't it? So you have to keep changing, and that's sometimes

dictated by fashion. Look at the craze for dwarf conifers in the 70s which is making a comeback. Bedding plants are out of fashion because they're hugely labour intensive and not sustainable. "Here in the Botanic Garden I think we'll see fewer formal herbaceous beds and softer, more naturalistic planting of shrubs, subshrubs, perennials, annuals and bulbs. We're focusing on climate resilience, devising strategies and infrastructure to futureproof our ability to efficiently maintain the collection. It's another experiment, given we don't know what climate conditions we'll face in the next 20 or 50 years."



The Mediterranean Beds at Cambridge University Botanic Garden Picture: Howard Rice

Sarah Claydon has been a horticulturist for more than 20 years and joined Pembroke College as its first female Head Gardener in 2021. After leaving Hills Road Sixth Form College, Sarah went to work in theatre and credits her then boyfriend's parents for her move into horticulture. "Every time we weren't at work in the theatre I'd be out in the garden with them," she says. "They don't know they set me on this path, but they, alongside my gardening grandparents, sparked my career change."

"I did an HND in horticulture, applied for jobs above my capability and the Head Gardener at Trinity Hall called to offer me a job," continues Sarah. "It was a massive learning curve, but I really enjoyed my time there. The new Head Gardener at Trinity College then took a chance on me and appointed me as his deputy, a role I held for 11 years. I've learned so much from everything I've done and now I love it here. We have three full-time staff and three part-time gardeners as well."

Sarah's appointment at Pembroke followed the retirement of Nick Firman after 56 years as Head Gardener. "What Nick didn't know about plants wasn't worth knowing," she says. Sarah felt his legacy but soon made her mark with new planting schemes and an increased focus on sustainability and biodiversity.

Sarah's passion and leadership skills are immediately evident upon meeting her. "I'm lucky my team are largely self-sufficient," she says, "as they proved when I was recently off sick. Personal development is important. Last June we said goodbye to

two team members on the same day who moved onto really good jobs. I couldn't offer the same challenges, so you have to help people grow and then let them go."

Pembroke's gardens each have a distinct character yet flow into one another. The latest, designed by Tom Stuart-Smith at Mill Lane, features drought-tolerant plants. In the Dolby Quarter (named after alumnus Ray Dolby) Sarah highlights plants suitable for our domestic gardens. The Judas Tree, *Cercis siliquastrum*, has beautiful pink blossom in spring and buttery yellow leaves in autumn. The smokebush *Cotinus coggygria* has showstopping fiery autumn colour. Sarah also recommends the oak-leaved hydrangea, *Hydrangea quercifolia*, and the shrubby hare's ear *Bupleurum fruticosum*, which has clusters of yellow flowers in summer. On the historic site, Sarah's favourite plants are *Salvia 'Amistad'*, *Dahlia 'Café au Lait'* and *Feijoa sellowiana*, the pineapple guava.

"As a College we're increasingly adopting sustainable solutions, so as a gardens department we're examining how we garden," she says. "We're harvesting rainwater, mulching, and choosing drought-tolerant plants. We're using organic feeds and planted a wildflower meadow on Foundress Court lawn to attract pollinators. We're upcycling materials, composting on site and improving lawn care regimes with scarifying, aerating and verticutting." Pembroke's green spaces have long attracted students, and Sarah is pleased



they're still choosing Pembroke for its gardens under her tenure. She fosters a welcoming atmosphere, wanting students to feel at home, and even offering a 'plant-sitting' service for students' houseplants when they're away. "During May Ball week my 'Mum side' really comes out," she says. "When they're tired or the contractor is being rude or something's gone wrong and I'm walking around, I always have sweets in my pocket."

There are now eight women head gardeners at Cambridge Colleges, more than ever before. "I think it's great the Colleges are appointing more women as gardeners," says Sarah, "it's evidence of the tipping point the industry is reaching. Gardening lends itself to many traditionally female traits, in that we're quite often creative and nurturing and those are great strengths in this industry."

She and Sally are part of a network of 34 Head Gardeners which includes Madingley Hall and the Wellcome Genome Campus and both point to the strong support within the group. Neither see a difference between male and female gardeners. "If you're considering coming into gardening," says Sarah, "you need to realise it's physically demanding for anyone, you need to be fit. I always go home tired but happy."

Melanie runs gardening and design company Hazelwood Plantscapes. To find out more, email melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk or visit hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk



The gardens at Pembroke College