

NextGen: HN unit specification

Planting Design for Sustainable Landscapes (SCQF level 8)

Unit code: JC0Q 48

SCQF level: 8 (16 SCQF credit points)

Valid from: August 2026

This unit specification provides detailed information about the unit to ensure consistent and transparent assessment year on year. It is for lecturers and assessors, and contains all the mandatory information you need to deliver and assess the unit.

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Unit purpose

This unit introduces learners to the principles and practices of sustainable planting design. The unit allows learners to produce ecologically informed planting schemes and specification of plants, including the integration of plant function and aesthetics.

It is suitable for learners who want a strong foundation in the defining principles and practices of the 'ecological turn' in the contemporary landscape design industry.

On completing the unit and on achieving the HND, learners may be able to progress to degree programmes in horticulture. Alternatively, they may want to go directly into employment in the horticulture industry or related work placements.

Entry requirements

Entry to this unit is at your centre's discretion. Before starting the unit, learners would benefit from having a foundation knowledge of garden design, on which this unit expands. We also recommend that learners have completed one or more of the following:

- HNC Horticulture
- a horticultural qualification at level 7
- appropriate work experience in horticulture

Unit outcomes

Learners who complete this unit can:

1. describe the principles and practices of sustainable planting design
2. produce ecologically informed planting schemes

Evidence requirements

Outcome 1

Learners must be able to articulate the principles and practice of sustainable planting design, demonstrating that they can:

- describe the purpose of nature-based solutions used in the landscape design industry
- explain how these nature-based solutions are delivered in practice

Learners could evidence this using a short film, podcast, or written report; agreeing the choice of media with their lecturer in advance.

Outcome 2

Learners must be able to produce and present ecologically informed planting designs, demonstrating that they can:

- analyse a planting scheme that demonstrates ecological sustainability
- produce ecologically informed planting schemes for two contrasting sites
- produce a specification of plants for each of the planting schemes, including the integration of plant function and aesthetics
- clearly state the complex technical planting design intentions
- organise complex design ideas and themes into a concise presentation
- explain and justify their design choices orally in a live situation

Knowledge and skills

Knowledge	Skills
Outcome 1 Learners should understand: - historical developments such as habitat fragmentation and decline due to, for example: - pressures from urban development - demands of sustainability goals - biodiversity action plans - recognition of ecosystem services - ecological theories and how they can be implemented in planting design, such as: - Philip Grime's 'Plant Life Strategies' - habitat stereotypes - phytosociology - the cues-to-care framework - vertical layers or the niche concept - the range and purpose of current dominant green infrastructure practices	Outcome 1 Learners can: - identify and describe principles and practices of sustainable planting design - describe the purpose of nature-based solutions used in the landscape design industry - apply critical thinking - explain how a range of nature-based solutions are delivered in practice - demonstrate clarity and accuracy of thought and expression - sustain attention on a complex task - construct and articulate a compelling and accurate account

Knowledge	Skills
Outcome 2 Learners should understand: - ecological theories and their implementation in planting design, such as: - Philip Grime's 'Plant Life Strategies' habitat stereotypes - phytosociology - cues to care - vertical layers, a core part of the niche concept - how to interpret a designed landscape in terms of ecological process - how to embed ecological principles into a planting design - the function of chosen plants in a landscape - how to create a planting design - how to communicate a planting design including the necessary level of detail required by industry - how to condense and re-present complex ideas - how to structure a narrative	Outcome 2 Learners can: - interpret a designed landscape in terms of ecological processes - create ecologically informed planting designs for contrasting sites - combine function with aesthetics when specifying plants for a design - clearly express complex technical planting design intentions - present with confidence their design ideas, as if to a client - explain and defend their work through engaging live presentations

Meta-skills

You must give learners opportunities to develop their meta-skills throughout this unit. We have suggested how to incorporate the most relevant ones into the unit content, but you may find other opportunities.

Self-management

This includes focusing, integrity, adapting and initiative. The most relevant are:

- focusing:
 - interpreting a designed landscape in terms of ecological processes
- integrity:
 - creating ecologically informed planting designs for contrasting sites
- adapting:
 - combining function with aesthetics when specifying plants for a design
- initiative:
 - clearly expressing complex technical planting design intentions

Social intelligence

This includes communicating, feeling, collaborating and leading. The most relevant are:

- communicating:
 - showing verbal, visual and written communication skills
- feeling:
 - being open to diverse positions and views
 - developing resilience to anxiety and stress

- collaborating:
 - team working
 - following and participating with consideration for others in complex, fast-moving discussion and debates
 - expanding social horizons

Innovation

This includes curiosity, creativity, sense-making and critical thinking. The most relevant are:

- curiosity:
 - independently keeping up to date with new theories and information about sustainability in a horticultural context
- creativity:
 - thinking critically and creatively
- sense-making:
 - applying knowledge from this and other units to establish available options given different landscape requirements and design briefs
- critical thinking:
 - using the 'negative capability' approach and imagination to come up with alternative solutions to problems

Literacies

This unit provides opportunities to develop the following literacies.

Numeracy

Learners develop their numeracy skills as they plan resource requirements and costings.

Communication

Learners enhance their communication skills as they interpret design briefs, convey and receive information, and put their presentations together.

Digital

Learners improve their digital skills as they use spreadsheet software to plan and present costings, and presentation software to describe their final designs.

Learning for Sustainability

Throughout this unit, you should encourage learners to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding of sustainability.

This includes:

- a general understanding of social, economic and environmental sustainability
- a general understanding of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- a deeper understanding of subject-specific sustainability
- the confidence to apply the skills, knowledge, understanding and values they develop in the next stage of their life

Delivery of unit

We recommend that you take a flexible approach to delivering this unit, using a combination of classroom sessions for lectures, studio sessions for crits and presentations, and glasshouse sessions for practical activities. Site visits may be useful where possible.

The notional design length for the unit is 80 hours. The amount of time you allocate to each outcome is at your centre's discretion.

Additional guidance

The guidance in this section is not mandatory.

Content and context for this unit

You should ensure learners can spend a generous amount of time in studio sessions, where you can observe their work and give feedback. This will help them to work in an ecologically informed manner. Learners should also regularly expose their work to other people in their class in these studio sessions.

Resources

Learners would find it useful to visit various sites and, where possible, to have access to a glasshouse for practical activities.

Centres delivering this qualification must have suitably qualified staff for each of the subject components. Your centre should already have established processes to ensure staff are appropriately qualified to deliver in this subject area.

Assessors and internal verifiers must hold an industry and/or subject-specific qualification equivalent to the qualification. Centre staff should have relevant industry experience and be able to demonstrate industry-relevant CPD to maintain their subject-specific knowledge and skills.

Approaches to delivery

It is not sufficient to lecture only and expect the learners to work independently without giving them ongoing feedback on their work. The skill of producing working planting plans takes practice with ample supervision. This serves to create an atmosphere of mutual support, encouragement and inspiration among the learners. You should make these sessions enjoyable and fun as well as informative. We emphasise this here, because learners without an arts background often view the

studio sessions as optional. They are not optional. Much of design learning happens in the 'doing' of design, especially when supervised.

Glasshouse or garden sessions are a crucial means of exploring plant physiology and plant growth patterns in close detail. You can carry out planting design workshops where learners can express colour, texture and form theory by constructing small compositions in medium-sized containers. These sessions can be very effective at reinforcing the theory, before learners do planting designs on paper.

You should critically explore and examine current green infrastructure practices used in industry, such as green walls, green roofs, street trees. This could be a short film, podcast or written report.

Approaches to assessment

The assessment for outcome 1 could take the form of short film, podcast, written report or similar. Learners should agree their choice in advance with lecturers to ensure ample scope to produce the required evidence.

Evidence for outcome 2 will consist of two separate planting designs and an oral presentation. The oral presentation is an important aspect of the assessment as it allows learners to demonstrate that they can present their designs effectively to clients.

Equality and inclusion

This unit is designed to be as fair and as accessible as possible with no unnecessary barriers to learning or assessment.

You must consider the needs of individual learners when planning learning experiences, selecting assessment methods or considering alternative evidence.

Guidance on assessment arrangements for disabled learners and those with additional support needs is available on the [assessment arrangements web page](#).

Information for learners

Planting Design for Sustainable Landscapes (SCQF level 8)

This information explains:

- what the unit is about
- what you should know or be able to do before you start
- what you need to do during the unit
- opportunities for further learning and employment

Unit information

This unit gives you the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills about both the function and the aesthetics of different plants, and the principles and practices involved in ecological planting designs. You learn about ecological theories and the ideas behind the latest developments in landscape design, and you have the opportunity to put different ideas into practice.

In outcome 1, you learn about the historical developments that have brought us to the point where ecological design is both necessary and possible.

In outcome 2, you apply ecological theories to analysing and creating planting designs.

Prior knowledge and skills

Before starting the unit, you would benefit from having a foundation knowledge of garden design, on which this unit expands. We also recommend that you have completed one or more of the following:

- HNC Horticulture
- a horticultural qualification at level 7
- appropriate work experience in horticulture

Assessment

You can be assessed in a variety of ways, but these would always include both design, and written and/or oral assignments.

Future progression and employment

On completion of the unit, and on achievement of the HND, you may be able to progress to the BSc in Horticulture. Alternatively, you may be able to go directly into employment in the horticulture industry or related work placements.

Meta-skills

Throughout this unit, you develop meta-skills that are useful for the horticulture sector.

Meta-skills are transferable behaviours and abilities that help you adapt and succeed in life, study and work. There are three categories of meta-skills: self-management, social intelligence and innovation.

Self-management

You develop your self-management skills as you manage your time in structuring work flows and organising schedules, rise to challenges, and grow in self-belief and self-confidence.

Social intelligence

You develop your social intelligence skills as you communicate with your peers and lecturers; collaborate on group tasks, taking other views and sensitivities into account; and develop resilience while expanding your social horizons.

Innovation

You develop your innovation skills as you think critically and creatively, and use your imagination and different approaches to solve problems.

Learning for Sustainability

Throughout this unit, you develop skills, knowledge and understanding of sustainability.

You learn about social, economic and environmental sustainability principles and how they relate to the horticulture sector. You also develop an understanding of the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#).

Administrative information

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Superclass: SF

History of changes

Version	Description of change	Date

Please check [our website](#) to ensure you are using the most up-to-date version of this unit.

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