

COLUMN

# It's time we learnt the truth about apprentices

**Alan Titchmarsh**

*The heart of the matter*

It is surprising, but there are still some people in this world who think of apprenticeships as second-best, as a career path to be followed only by those unlucky enough to achieve grades that will not win them a place at university. It is a sentiment that is as inaccurate as it is flawed, and it has resulted, over the past 30 or 40 years, in a completely unbalanced



workforce: a workforce lacking in practical skills and overpeopled by those with academic qualifications that have no relevance to their eventual employment.

Don't get me wrong. Any kind of learning is useful, even if the ultimate career path is not directly in line with the subject studied, but I bemoan the general lack of respect today for those who are good with their hands.

Practical ability is undervalued and, in many cases, underpaid. Without practical skills our society would fall apart, and yet year after year, in school after school, the emphasis is placed on academic achievement rather than making the most of an individual's own particular aptitudes, the



Learning on the job: horticulture offers lots of apprenticeships - and careers

exploration and discovery of which can ensure greater satisfaction than would be the case with a well-trodden career path in law, education, banking and the like.

Yes, there are many students who will benefit from a university education, and who will go on to worthwhile careers afterwards, but to insist that such is the case across the board is a lazy mistake that can have disastrous consequences both for individuals and for skilled trades.

Finally, at long last, the political parties are making a stand and

encouraging all manner of firms to offer apprenticeships, training on the job to ensure that everything from engineering to horticulture, thatching, building and wood carving is underpinned by the vital skills necessary for our wellbeing.

The balance is gradually being redressed but success will not be achieved overnight. It is one thing to offer apprenticeships, it is quite another to turn around attitudes and to convince parents, as well as those about to enter employment, that apprenticeships are genuinely

valued and will be rewarded not simply financially, but also in terms of respect and onward development.

My own career of horticulture is a case in point. We have a chronic shortage of skilled personnel to fill jobs that are there for the taking, jobs that will offer satisfaction and stimulating long-term employment. An apprenticeship in horticulture does not condemn someone to a lifetime of weeding. It may well begin with simple tasks, as should any career, but these are developed to ensure that any career is built on a firm, broad base. A wide knowledge of all aspects of the subject is essential before specialisation can take place later on.

At the last count I totted up 60 different careers in horticulture alone, including arboriculture, greenkeeping, journalism and media, garden design, glasshouse crop production, plant breeding and propagation. Apprenticeships are a way in, a way of opening eyes to the breadth of any career, and they can open up a world that remains closed to those who are "late developers".

I speak from experience, as a lad who left school at 15 with one O-level (in art) to become an apprentice gardener. I was "good with my hands". My academic achievements, such as they were, occurred later in life and during my training. As a result I bless those who encouraged me on the apprenticeship path and am thankful for the experience that gave me such a rounded start in life.

Apprentices as second-class citizens? I don't think so.