

BEST in Horticulture's Practical Tips for RHS exams

So, how do you get the best chance of passing?

1. It doesn't start with exams, or even past exam papers. **It starts with the syllabus.**

- All learning outcomes will be examined so there will be one question (at least) on each. If there are six different assessment points in a learning outcome, the exam question could target any of them - or a combination of more than one.
- Read, and re-read, the syllabus. Get really familiar with exactly what it says you need to know, and with the wording of each separate assessment point within an outcome.
- Understand the difference between 'State', 'List', 'Describe' and 'Define' – in terms of the level of detail and complexity of answer they require. *We've put together a separate list with some guidance on this, using horticultural examples.*
- You need to develop a strategy for dealing with the scope of the syllabus, reducing your revision to manageable levels. Consolidate your course notes, then consolidate those over again to give you the core information – definitions – plus relevant NAMED plant examples.
- Work intelligently and **find plant examples that multi-task** from one unit to another.

Once you have learned the plant name *Crataegus monogyna*, you have an example of:

woody deciduous shrub/ small tree; native hedging; autumn colour(berries); good for coastal/exposed situations; tolerant of chalk and wet soils; spring colour (blossom); wildlife and pollinator friendly; plant propagated from seed; stem adaptation (thorns); fruit which attracts birds to distribute seeds

and for higher levels of study, also an example of:

seed which needs to be removed from fruit to germinate; hard seedcoat; pome; a descriptive specific epithet (monogyna – single ovary/seed); corymb inflorescence; plant susceptible to fireblight; member of Rosaceae.....

- If you can possibly learn **typical plant examples**, do so. It may seem boring to use the same examples of stolons, half-hardy plants or leaf adaptations for storage that all the text books (or your notes) have - but if you go for the unusual, exotic or borderline ('well, it's hardy in MY garden!') you are risking your marks. If you are asked for a climber, don't give something that doesn't climb, but is grown against walls; if you are asked for herbaceous perennials try not to stray into borderlines of sub-shrubs.

Be obvious.

- Try to use full botanical names all the time in your answers. Exceptions are
 - where it's not relevant, like vegetables and fruit; strawberry 'Elsanta', potato 'Maris Peer' are fine;
 - where you give genus and cultivar instead e.g. Hosta 'Fire and Ice';
 - or where you are generalising - and only if it's accurate to use just the genus. If you say 'most perennial lobelias prefer moist soil' that's fine, but if you say 'Salvias are hardy perennials', for example, not all species of *Salvia* are hardy.
- If you can't remember the full Latin name, put the genus – and possibly put the common name in brackets, so that it's clear what plant you are thinking of. Sometimes the common name can help clarify a generic name that is too broad to give a half mark.

Examples from reading the syllabus:

- In learning about plant growth you may have done a lot of work on the subject of meristems - but if the syllabus wording says '**State where active cell division is located**' the simple answer, the two sites, is all the examiners can ask for when framing a question.
They can't ask you for a description of mitosis or meristematic cell division, or anything else **outside** the scope of the written syllabus.
- '*State what is meant by contact, translocated and selective herbicides, and describe ONE situation where EACH type would be used appropriately.*'

This is an assessment point from Plant Health;

It could nearly be an exam question all by itself – three simple definitions, expanded by three 'descriptions' - an example of the 'appropriate' use of each type of herbicide.

If you aren't asked specifically for plant examples, you won't get lower marks if you don't use them but give a good description anyway; if your description is thin, it could be boosted by a CORRECTLY named example of an appropriate plant, like *Poa annua* in gravel drive, *Convolvulus arvensis* among woody shrubs, and *Taraxacum officinale* in a lawn, for the three situations.

So, when you go through your notes to consolidate them for revision, prepare keypoint herbicide definitions and appropriate uses – and with plant examples of what you are trying to control that illustrate this.

2. Look at the RHS past papers on the website and **get familiar with the way exam questions are framed**. The RHS only allows access at recent ones – older exam questions, if you can find them, will be relevant for small bites of information, perhaps, but can be very misleading about how questions are structured and how they should be answered.

If you last took an RHS exams some years ago, forget the advice you may have been given. With previous exam systems, the RHS favoured well written answers and frowned on bullet point lists. Now that time is critical, no-one will lose marks for a bullet list, if that is the type of information the question requires.

Remember - if the question asks for 4 points, only the first 4 are marked, so it is much easier if you do make a list and number them - and don't throw in everything you can think of in the hope that the examiner will pick out the right ones and ignore the others!

3. **Practise**. Not just finding the facts to fit all the past questions you can find, and all the assessment points, but make yourself work against the clock until the facts come readily to your pen.

OK, so the questions won't be new to you after the first run through, but try again without your notes. Then work on a different unit, and try again when you've been working on other topics.

4. After you've tried the questions at least once, **read any examiners' comments** that are published (usually well after results are released). Often the comments will include information which seems to go well beyond what you think is strictly relevant, and you will struggle to see how you could have given these incredibly detailed answers.

Remember that often the examiner is looking at a mark scheme which has to cover all possible 'correct' answers that might be given - including some from people who have extra, specific knowledge beyond level 2. So examiner's reports can give a slightly false impression of what you would need to include to pass - they give about 110% of the answer needed.

5. **Keep practising, producing answers to time**. Don't forget that all this writing is going to help you face the exam – most of us don't have to write solidly for even forty minutes at a time, let alone do it three or four times in a day.

If you can work through these tips to prepare yourself – not in the last couple of weeks before the exams, but right from an early stage - starting to fix the core information in your mind, you are giving yourself the best possible chance to succeed.

Before the exam:

Make sure you have some form of identification on you; it's required now for the exams.

Check the route if you haven't driven to the exam centre before, and allow lots of extra time if it involves using the A46 near Coventry or any main road around Oxford in the rush hour, or any road to get to Wisley.

Check any parking information and directions to the exam rooms you've been given - also check the exam timetable.

Get your exam kit together - Have a spare pen, a pencil and eraser, plus a ruler - it's sometimes useful to remind yourself what 30cm looks like when you are trying to visualise planting depths, spacing, estimated size of a shrub....

And in the exam?

- **Re-read the questions** -it may be hard in an exam situation to do this but it's vital – your first, slightly panicked impression of what the question wanted may not be what it was really asking for.
- **Underline key words in the question** - it may help you to focus your answer.
- **Draw and label diagrams** if they are quicker than writing a paragraph of description
- **Above all, don't panic** and
- If you must sing 'the photosynthesis song' to remember inputs and outputs, don't do it out loud!