HELG Policy Document 2026

Introduction

The HELG needs to emphasise that a career in horticulture is a career that makes a real difference, and that horticulture jobs are real jobs of importance that have meaning, because horticulturists provide essential food and services that are critical for human health and wellbeing and maintaining a healthy environment.

Also, the HELG must address the perception that horticulture is only for the "less academically able". To do this the HELG needs to apply a coordinated mix of messaging, education reform, industry visibility, and role modelling.

To that end the HELG will apply a practical, strategic approach across policy, education, and outreach.

The following is a 12-point framework to achieve the HELG this objective.

1. Reframe horticulture as a science-led, innovation-driven field

Shift the narrative from "manual work" to "applied science and technology."

- Emphasise links to **biology/biological sciences, environmental science, climate Action (mitigation, adaptation & resilience), food systems, and sustainability.**
- Showcase areas like:
    - Precision horticulture and AI-driven crop systems
    - Glasshouse production and mushroom production are more like advanced manufacturing than traditional farming)
    - Plant genetics and breeding
    - Controlled environment agriculture (CEA)
    - Urban greening and ecosystem services
- Use language such as *"plant science," "sustainable systems," "green infrastructure, or Green Tec"* rather than purely "gardening". A term what we need to use less often.

HELG **Action:** Develop communication campaigns highlighting horticulture as a STEM pathway.

2. Elevate academic pathways and progression routes

Make the intellectual rigor visible.

- Highlight degree-level programmes, postgraduate research (Master's and PhD degrees), and professional accreditation (Chartered Horticulturist, ISHS, ILI, ALCI, GLDA membership).
- Promote diverse progression routes into horticulture:
    - Ensure no cul-de-sacs in horticulture education
    - Apprenticeships → degrees → research careers
- Publicise graduate destinations:

- Consultancy, policy, academia, biotech, sustainability, leadership, entrepreneurship, landscape design, construction and maintenance, environmental management, turf grass technical advisors, Social and therapeutic practitioners.

HELG **Action:** Create clear "career maps" showing long-term intellectual and professional progression.

3. Use high-caliber role models to make careers tangible and to visualise the pathways

Perceptions change when people see who works in the sector.

- Feature:
  - Scientists, researchers, and innovators in horticulture
  - Alumni working in global sustainability roles
  - Growers/Entrepreneurs in plant production, agri-tech and food systems
- Prioritise voices of:
  - High-achieving students and graduates
  - Career switchers from other academic fields

Action: Build a visible ambassador network (social media, school outreach, public talks)

4. Embed horticulture within mainstream education

Normalise horticulture as an academic subject as early as possible in the education cycle, Pre-School, Primary, Secondary Tertiary.

- Integrate horticulture into:
  - Biology, chemistry and physics curricula
  - Business curricula
  - Environmental science modules
  - Geography and Climate Education
- Promote project-based learning (target TY programmes and summer schools/camps):
  - Environmental horticulture, design and build projects
  - Plant production systems, including tissue culture
  - Food production systems
  - Sustainability challenges
  - Biodiversity implementation and maintenance
  - Data-led growing experiments

Action: Position horticulture as a *context* for learning core academic subjects, not an "alternative" to them.

5. Challenge the "fallback option" narrative directly

***Confront the stigma openly and strategically*. Improve the social status of the industry.**

- Avoid presenting horticulture as a pathway for disengaged learners

- Replace deficit language ("practical learners") with **dual competence framing**:
    - "Academically rigorous and practically applied"
- Use evidence:
    - Complexity of plant systems
    - Showcase the business and economic scale of industry

Action: Audit marketing materials and remove language that unintentionally reinforce low-status perceptions or small-scale enterprises (e.g. Market Gardening!)

6. Highlight economic value and career security

*Status perceptions are often linked to income and stability***.**

- Highlight the economic value of the wider industry. Showcase Ireland's strengths in food branding and reputation, the industry's expanding environmental focus, recent all-island policy supports, the extensive education system and climatic conditions.

- Emphasise:
    - Global demand for food and green infrastructure
    - Skills shortages in horticulture
    - Opportunities in entrepreneurship and innovation
- Showcase salary benchmarks and career growth

Action: Publish "career outcome" data alongside academic programme information.

7. Leverage sustainability and climate urgency

Position horticulture as central to solving global challenges with emphasis on elevating the industry to the critical role of food security and climate action on the island.

- Connect the industry to:
    - Food security
    - Climate Action (adaptation/mitigation)
    - Biodiversity restoration
    - Peat reduction
    - Ecosystem services
    - Urban resilience
- Young people especially respond to purpose-driven, personally meaningful careers. Highlight and communicate the independence and lifestyle flexibility that is a feature of a career in horticulture. A career that can leave a legacy in the social and physical landscape.

Action: Frame horticulture as a **mission-oriented career**, not just an occupation.

8. Strengthen industry–academia partnerships

Visible collaboration reinforces legitimacy.

- Partner with:
    - All industry sectors
    - Research institutes
    - Tech companies (AI, sensors, robotics)
    - Environmental organisations
- Co-develop internships and research projects
- Introduce a Horticulture Innovation Festival and continue to promote the CIH Young Horticulturist of the Year competition and the ISHS Young Minds programme.

Action: Publicise joint innovation projects to demonstrate intellectual depth.

9. Improve media representation by utilizing innovate platforms to target accurate messaging campaigns

Public perception is heavily shaped by media narratives.

- Move beyond:
    - Lifestyle gardening shows (NB)
    - Emphasise that horticulture provides impactful careers with real jobs.
- Increase visibility of:
    - Scientific breakthroughs
    - Tech-enabled growing systems
    - Policy and global food system discussions
    - Climate mitigation solutions
    - Food security
    - Restorative landscapes

Action: Engage journalists and content creators to tell more complex horticulture stories

10. Use language carefully

Terminology influences perceived status.

Consider shifting toward:

- Highlight horticulture as a science-based discipline and highlight the role of Horticultural Science
- Use “Plant science” in addition to “horticulture” (in some contexts)
- “Green infrastructure” instead of “landscaping”
- “Controlled environment horticulture” instead of “indoor growing”

Action: Align branding with terminology used in high-status STEM fields.

11. Promote interdisciplinary identity

Break the binary between “academic” and “practical.”

Position horticulture as combining:

- Science (biology, chemistry, ecology, geology and physics)
- Technology (automation, data analytics)
- Design (landscape architecture)
- Business (supply chains, entrepreneurship)

Action: Develop messaging such as:

"Horticulture is where science, technology, and sustainability meet."

12. Engage parents, teachers, and career advisors

They strongly influence perceptions.

- Provide:
  - Updated career information packs
  - Continuing professional development (CPD) sessions for industry
- Address outdated assumptions directly

Action: Run targeted outreach campaigns correcting misconceptions among influencers.

Conclusion

Changing this perception requires **repositioning horticulture from a fallback trade to a complex, knowledge-intensive, future-facing discipline**. The most effective strategy combines:

- Strong messaging (STEM, innovation, sustainability)
- Visible academic and career pathways
- Credible role models
- Integration into mainstream education

"The challenge is not to make horticulture more academic—it already is. The challenge is to make that reality visible."