

Growing experience at the Botanics

Our accelerated use of online technology means we can deliver better courses to a greater range of students than ever

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The year 2020 brought much that was bad but it also accelerated change in education delivery which will yield ongoing benefits. It transformed the learning environment in the Botanic Gardens, requiring us to adapt quickly to maintain the quality of the education that we pride ourselves on.

Traditional classrooms became virtual ones overnight. Staff and students made the digital leap, embracing new technologies and strategies to meet module learning outcomes. The online video communications platform Zoom is now being used to deliver lectures, arrange meetings and workshops with students, while Moodle, an online learning platform, hosts all the course material and assessments for the students.

Zoom proved invaluable in maintaining contact with our students, both at home and abroad. Students



Blended learning means students can combine online tuition in horticulture with skills training at the National Botanic Gardens, once that can be delivered in line with Government rules on COVID-19.



Teagasc students outline the message while studying planting strategies in Merrion square.

were able to see a familiar face from the college which kept them up-to-date with developments on campus.

These digital systems will outlast the coronavirus pandemic and help pave the way for increased availability of online programmes and greater access to courses. “Blended learning” made our courses accessible to students who don’t have the option to study full-time. Students can now attend from a location of their choice for a significant part of the course.

As a large portion of our training is very hands-on, one of the main challenges we face is delivering practical skills remotely.

We have adopted flexible approaches to this by including active experimentations, problem-based learning techniques, numerous questions with detailed feedback, videos, and photographs.

Students, having prior knowledge of the tasks at hand, attend the college for practical training in small, physically distanced pods or groups (safety is always paramount with Government guidelines strictly followed). This multimedia approach has allowed us to teach practical hands-on skills effectively.

Field trips have always been a large element of horticulture courses. Although these have been geographically curtailed during the pandemic, the georgian squares in Dublin city centre were a destination for our

third-year degree students in 2020.

Here, students were tasked with evaluating the different planting approaches in each of the squares and how they can be used to enhance our city environments in terms of biodiversity, ecology and sustainability.

Planting

The importance of planting in our urban and rural environments has never been more important.

In an urban environment, planting is vital to mitigate against climate change and high pollution levels. For instance, tree planting can improve air quality, making our cities healthier places to live in.

For me, 2020 will be the year that I became assistant principal in the National Botanic Gardens. Originally from a dairy farm at the foothills of Slievenamon, Co Tipperary (a far cry from all the above-mentioned technology), I resisted obtaining a laptop or mobile phone until my mid-twenties.

I’m glad to say my initial reluctance wore off eventually and that before the pandemic, I was equipped with at least a passing knowledge of the software and media platforms that we now take for granted as a college.

So while we won’t look back fondly on 2020, it accelerated our use of tools which I believe will continue to enhance the student experience as we move into a more “normal” year in 2021.