

Do you want to earn between £20,000 & £40,000?

Have you thought about a career in commercial horticulture?

Commercial horticulture - the growing of plants for commercial purposes
Food crops - fruit, vegetables, salads, herbs, grapes for wine-making
Flowering plants, trees and shrubs for gardens/parks; fruit trees

Crops are either grown in the field or under protected conditions, in glasshouses or polytunnels

CASE STUDY



NAME

Neli Manoilova

ROLE

Soft fruit grower for Hugh Lowe Farms, Wested Farm, Swanley, Kent – Hugh Lowe Farms is one of the UK's leading soft fruit growers [www.hughlowefarms.com]

SALARY

£20,000 - £40,000

QUALIFICATIONS NECESSARY

Agriculture/food/science-based degree/diploma; apprenticeship plus experience. (I have a level three Diploma in Production Horticulture).

IS TRAINING GIVEN?

Yes – continuing professional development training, from integrated pest management (IPM) to food safety, first aid, finance and plant biology.

WORKING LIFE (WHAT DO YOU DO?)

I work outdoors in the fields where raspberries and strawberries are grown in soil under polytunnels. My start times vary throughout the seasons. During the peak season, I start work around 5.30am, finishing around 4pm, but during the autumn I work between 7am and 4pm. Every day, I check our weather stations – the rainfall records, the temperature and the relative humidity levels. This information helps me to take decisions on crop care, such as opening and closing the vents on the polytunnels to control the temperature inside them. (Plants can suffer heat stress, particularly if there is insufficient moisture in the soil).

Whenever I am in the fields, I crop walk, looking for pests and diseases and I ask my colleagues to note any pest or disease problems too. I can oversee the work of up to 100 people during the peak season – including harvest workers and those doing 'non harvest' tasks such as deflowering the plants, weeding and runner cutting (trimming the runners off strawberry plants to make them more productive). I deal with the field supervisors, the harvest managers and the tunnel managers.

We discuss what needs to be done, how much crop we have to pick, the picking teams and how many pickers we shall need. We also decide what supplies we will need for the picking processes. I make sure that people are happy and safe in their work. I ensure that the fields are picked clean (of fruit) and that the plants have not been damaged in any way.

Every week, my managers come to meet me and we walk the fields together. We take decisions about cropping, picking and other matters.

SKILLS AND PERSONAL QUALITIES:

People skills, communications skills, IT skills, patience and an interest in plants (growing crops is a long term job), leadership, attention to detail, decision making skills, project management skills, flexible and adaptable. Good practical skills, reliable, responsible, able to work in a team or alone, organisational ability.

DID YOU DO ANY WORK EXPERIENCE BEFORE JOINING?

Yes – I joined Hugh Lowe Farms in 2005, working in the packhouse until 2010. I became very interested in soft fruit production. The company supported me when I wished to become a grower, allowing me to undertake a Diploma in Production Horticulture (level three) at Hadlow College, in Kent, between 2010 and 2012 [www.hadlow.ac.uk]. This covered growing plants, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), recognising pests and diseases, health and safety and the management of people. A certain level of experience is essential for entry onto a course for a Diploma in Production Horticulture.

ROUTES INTO HORTICULTURE:

Routes vary but a good education is useful. Previous experience of working in horticulture may prove useful. Apprenticeship schemes available for over 16s. Some roles require study in Higher Education. See www.lantra.co.uk/careers