

Blossom time

Who knew flowers could change people's lives? **Jane Yettram** reports

ORGANIC BLOOMS

When Jo Wright had her light-bulb moment 16 years ago, she already knew the difference that growing things could make. Since 1995, when she graduated with a horticulture degree, she had been running a business using different types of horticulture with people with learning disabilities, mental health needs, dementia and more.

'I have always been interested in how horticulture can be used as a medium for therapy and recovery,' says Jo, who has just turned 50. 'Back then, we were on an estate doing horticulture with clients referred from social services.

It was about recovery and skills but wasn't getting anyone to the next step.

'The more I worked with people, the more they kept saying: we love gardening, this is doing us good, but we want jobs – jobs will change our life, integrate us back into society and give us self-esteem.'

Then, in 2006, Jo was at a friend's wedding. 'I realised all the bouquets and table arrangements used British cottage garden flowers. I thought – we could grow and sell all of those.'

Cut flowers, Jo knew, were a high-value, sought-after product. 'But I also knew that the input required is very accessible to people with learning

disabilities and mental health issues. You can break down all the tasks and each one is achievable.'

The idea was perfect. 'But we took it slowly because we wanted our lovely workforce – with autism, Asperger's, schizophrenia and other issues – to be central to it, not just on the fringes. Finally, we moved to a site with a farm shop, and set up as an organic cut-flower nursery, occasionally selling in the shop.'

It was also important for Organic Blooms to be a commercial as well as a social enterprise. 'We wanted to employ people who wouldn't get a job in the mainstream job market. But we also wanted customers to buy our products based on quality, not for the sympathy vote.'

LIFE LESSONS

Now, at their nine-acre site near Bristol, 30-40 trainees come to Organic Blooms every week, referred by the local authority. 'Some are unable to communicate verbally. Some have OCD and frequently need to stop and wash their hands. Some have limited cognitive understanding – so we simply model what needs doing and they copy us. Some have suffered for years with anxiety and depression... But all do City and Guilds training in horticulture. And even those who might never get paid work can do really useful, meaningful volunteering with us.'

As well as learning to work with and grow

flowers, trainees also learn softer skills: 'Like how to take initiative, who to go to when you've got a problem, how to communicate appropriately...'

Plus trainees learn about managing money and handling customers. 'We're not a retail outlet, and mainly sell our flowers through our website or through Abel and Cole, the organic food-box delivery service. But we do have the odd day when the shop is open, as well as click and collect and sales throughout the year, so trainees get involved in dealing with customers.'

Organic Blooms now employs eight former trainees in all sorts of roles. 'One trainee does my seed sowing. He's my main propagator. He knows that



Organic Blooms founder Jo Wright (left) and head florist Wendy Paul



A basket of blooms ready for arranging



Caucasian scabious

Jo's favourite flower: Caucasian scabious

as a florist's assistant. She's really grown in confidence and loves that she's more qualified than some of our other florists now!

FLOWER POWER

Another former trainee is now employed as a supervisor. 'Katy has a history of bipolar,' says Jo. 'She struggled through her early years, going in and out of hospital, and was still really poorly when she came to us. But she loved the outdoors, and – from having a stable environment, a change of meds and a brilliant occupational therapist who worked well with us – within a few years she was thriving.

'We saw so much potential in Katy that we gave her the supervisor role supporting current trainees. She hasn't looked back. She's brilliant with people

who are struggling because she really understands, and she'll always go the extra mile.'

For Katy, it's been life-changing. 'I absolutely love working here,' she enthuses. 'Jo and the others have been really supportive, even when I've been quite unwell. They've got me through it really. It's the best job I've ever had and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.'

About 5-10% of trainees move on to education or employment elsewhere. 'Quite a few go into support work, some are delivery drivers, one is a chef, and many become self-employed gardeners,' says Jo. 'We support them for quite a while afterwards because there's always a honeymoon period in a new job. Recovery isn't a straight line, but we're in for the long term.'

But whatever former trainees do, being employed is fundamental. 'If you've been on benefits all your life, or on the receiving end of services, being in a role where you are contributing, where you are valued and where you are being paid is a game changer,' Jo explains. 'Suddenly you feel on a level with everyone, truly part of society. And your horizons simply open up.'

Find out more at www.organicblooms.co.uk