

PLANT HEALTHY

—Raising Biosecurity Standards From The Ground Up

Why a voluntary UK scheme to embed biosecurity practices is drawing attention worldwide as pests, diseases, and climate change intensify.



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Plant health and biosecurity are rapidly moving up the agenda for growers, traders, and policymakers alike. In the UK, one industry-led initiative has been quietly making waves: Plant Healthy, a voluntary certification scheme designed to raise standards across the ornamental plant and tree supply chain. To learn more, *FloraCulture International* spoke with Malcolm Catlin, Project Director of Plant Healthy Ltd, about how the scheme works, what motivates growers to take part, and why now is the right moment for a more coordinated and proactive approach to plant health. same issue persists: labour is no longer plentiful.

FloraCulture International: You've been leading Plant Healthy since May 2024 — what motivates you personally about plant health and biosecurity?

Malcolm Catlin: “In previous roles, I spent a lot of time with growers in the EU, looking at crops for export to the UK, and with the British importers, ensuring they were fully briefed on the rules and potential pest risks associated with certain crops. Two things struck me: firstly, the consequences not just for the importer, but also for the grower (and potentially their whole region) if a serious pest or disease strikes; and secondly, the difficulty that sometimes exists in getting clear information on those rules and risks. When I saw this role advertised, I thought much further than just whether I was a ‘good fit’. I also noticed that protecting not just

the economic value of trees and plants, but also the environmental and social benefits, could be served best by helping businesses to embed their own biosecurity practices. To achieve this, there must be no obstacles to understanding the threats and the measures to minimise them. Plant Healthy had great foundations in place and just needed to be driven forward, so I couldn't resist applying!"

Plant health isn't always front-of-mind until something goes wrong. Has it been a challenge to shift perceptions and promote a more proactive approach?

"In some sectors, particularly those involving trees and other woody plants, the nature and prevalence of pest threats are such that the need for proactive measures is generally well understood; however, in others, perhaps less so. There are other potential hurdles or questions: 'Why do we need voluntary measures on top of statutory ones? I'm already doing most of this. Not another scheme — how much will it cost? I don't have the technical knowledge or time to do this. What are the benefits to me?'... and so on. A big part of my role, therefore, is to answer the questions and help to overcome the potential hurdles.

Looking back, are there any moments or milestones that really stand out for you in the development of the Plant Healthy scheme?

"Many of the key steps occurred prior to my involvement, starting with the formation of the Plant Health Alliance. This is a broad coalition of trade and professional bodies, NGOs and the governments of Great Britain covering the whole of the tree and plant sector, which still meets regularly and has oversight of Plant Healthy. This, in turn, led to the writing of our Standard, the setting up of our Certification Scheme and the charitable body which administers both. Since then, uptake of certification has been growing: at the time of writing, the 100th member milestone is imminent, and those members will cover around 200 million plants per year across more than 3,500 hectares.

Lastly, I would include attending the first event, where we began to engage with the public on this topic, at the BBC 'Gardeners' World Live Show' in June 2025, which provided valuable insight into how we engage with the public in the government/trade/public partnership for protecting plant health.

For our international readers, could you briefly introduce Plant Healthy — what it is, and why it was developed?

"Plant Healthy provides a framework for, and recognition of, a high standard of biosecurity for any enterprise, anywhere, engaged in growing or handling plants. It provides a Standard for the certification of good practice, allied to a certification scheme that offers support (in the form of templates, e-learning, and so on), as well as independent certification bodies for audits. The Standard, Scheme, and Plant Healthy logo (used by certified businesses) is owned by Plant Healthy Limited, a registered charity that promotes it, while employing independent technical and compliance specialists."

The Plant Health Management Standard is described as a systems-based approach to biosecurity. What exactly does that involve, especially from a grower's point of view?

"It requires growers (and others) to first have all the basics in place: compliance with all applicable

'GOOD BIOSECURITY IS BOTH A PROTECTION AND A BUSINESS ASSET'

legislation, a biosecurity policy relevant to the business, and defined responsibilities for every aspect of biosecurity, from policy development to the approval of suppliers and personnel carrying out daily checks. At its heart is a 'Site and Operations Pest Risk Analysis (SOPRA)' which requires a systematic review of the plant genera and species being grown, traded, or planted, in the context of the grower's own site and methods; the serious pest and disease risks associated with those types of plants; the pathways by which they can be introduced and spread; and the steps that can be taken to mitigate those risks to an appropriate level of protection. It then goes on to cover the selection of suppliers from a biosecurity point of view; operational practices including hygiene, water, weeds, growing media, waste, visitors, vehicles and machinery, and the surrounding environment; checks throughout the process, record keeping and traceability; training, sources of information; and continuous improvement. By systematically covering every aspect of the operation in this way, it is designed to help prevent problems before they arise, rather than dealing with them afterwards."

Certified member-Crowders Nursery who cleverly made the Plant Healthy logo out of plants.



Why was it important that this remain a voluntary scheme?

"Our view is that the best protection comes from experts who handle plants on a daily basis, based on their knowledge of the risks and a desire to protect their own trade, their customers, and the environment. Mandatory rules will still be in place, but official inspections usually involve sampling, so not everything is visible (and not all problems are apparent at all times of the year). The two, therefore, complement each other. In the UK, we are starting to see the

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government and the wider public sector incorporate the Plant Health Management Standard into procurement specifications applied to the forestry and amenity sectors, and possibly soon to all plants purchased.”

Who is the scheme for, and what kind of growers or businesses are already getting certified?

“It can be applied to all types of growers, including ornamental, amenity, and tree growers, as well as landscapers, arborists, retailers, wholesalers, and large gardens. All have a role to play in the selection, sourcing, handling, and checking of plants, and to ensure they keep up to date with the changing nature and extent of pest threats.”

What motivates certified businesses to take part? What kind of benefits are they seeing?

“Reasons for participation include a belief that good biosecurity practice is the right thing to do, or because it provides protection against the substantial costs (financial and reputational) associated with harmful plant pests and diseases, it is a business attribute that can be promoted or provides a reason for preferring a grower or supplier, there is a need in some cases, for example, because of a biosecure procurement requirement, and because it is a good way of keeping up to date with new threats and rules. We are working on possible further incentives for certification, one of which would be the provision of some financial support via an insurance scheme for certified businesses in the event of a plant health problem.”

Could you walk us through what certification involves – how accessible is the process, and what do audits typically assess?

“There are four stages:

- **Preparation** – includes a review against the Standard, carrying out the risk assessment and any training required, putting in place the necessary procedures, policies, and record-keeping, etc. All of these are supported by a self-assessment, e-learning modules, document templates and one-to-one sessions.

- **Application** – apply to the certification bodies for quotes, then book the audit.

- **Audit and Certification** – submission of any required documents in advance, a site visit by the independent auditor, follow-up and closure of any (all) non-conformances and then issue of the certificate.

- **Maintenance** – periodic self-assessment, annual re-audit and continuous improvement.”

Is there a standout example or grower story that captures how the Standard works in the real world?

“My favourite example is one that many existing Scheme members have reported, and that is how it has been wholeheartedly embraced by their employees, who positively enjoy their training and participate in regular, competitive identification quizzes. One site I recently visited had hidden various plastic ‘bugs’ around the site and set up a customer versus staff challenge to see who could find them first. The level of staff engagement and contribution to the safeguarding and success of these businesses has been fantastic to hear about.”

You’ve mentioned that Plant Healthy could be applied outside of Great Britain. How adaptable is it?

“The principles are universally applicable, and the legislation section requires compliance with the applicable national rules. Discussions are underway with other schemes and trade organisations to explore both certification under Plant Healthy and alignment with these other schemes. At the top level, it is about raising consciousness of biosecurity. Threats are increasing due to the rise in international trade and travel, climate change, and the use of fewer chemicals, among other factors. Ethical, environmental, and GAP standards are widely understood and adopted throughout the Floriculture Industry, and biosecurity needs to be included as part of our

overall sustainability strategy. We are also keen to continue to work with AIPH on a review of biosecurity standards around the world, to see how we can all learn from good practice elsewhere.”

What role does the broader Plant Health Alliance play in supporting and shaping the scheme?

“Their breadth of reach across all sectors helps to understand the different needs and ways of working of their respective areas, and how we can make good biosecurity practice as relevant and accessible as possible to their members and stakeholders. They also play a role in promoting the awareness of good practice generally, and Plant Healthy specifically. Their oversight is also a key part of maintaining the Standard and the Scheme, through their Working Group and independent Technical Advisory Group.”

What would success look like for Plant Healthy in the next five years?

“Our overall aim is to encourage and support as many enterprises as possible in embedding good biosecurity practices into their working methods. This means growth not just in numbers, but across the many sectors of our trade, industry, and profession, and geographically as well. This will be achieved through promotion and marketing, developing further incentives and support mechanisms (including for smaller businesses), benchmarking and cooperation with other schemes, and raising public awareness of the role they can play.”

What message would you give to international growers considering adopting a biosecurity standard like Plant Healthy?

“I would strongly urge you to look not just at the work involved, but also to consider the benefits to your business: to maximise the level of protection against damaging and costly pest and disease threats, to promote your business and to engage your teams in this important work fully. There is preparatory work to be done, of course, but support will be available, and once done, maintaining it will be part of your everyday way of working.”

“AT ITS HEART [PLANT HEALTHY] IS A SYSTEMATIC RISK ANALYSIS DESIGNED TO PREVENT PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY ARISE’