FEATURE

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PLANT HEALTHY

WHY PLANT BIOSECURITY IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

Six years after the launch of this biosecurity certification scheme, members have reported multiple positive impacts and benefits for their business – well beyond the primary purpose of protecting against harmful pests and diseases.



A New Zealand-style biosecurity station at Benmore Botanic Garden: clear signage and footwear cleaning facilities help protect the living collections.

The Plant Healthy Certification Scheme launched in 2020, with several pioneering UK-based forestry nurseries becoming certified early on. Run by Plant Healthy Limited, a charity that represents the interests of the Plant Health Alliance, the Scheme now has 110 members.

These include commercial and not-for profit organisations that grow, trade and manage plants and trees, including some of the country's most celebrated public gardens. Between them, members produce over 200 million plants and trees per annum from a production area covering around 3,500 hectares.

Setting the standard

The Plant Health Management Standard (PHMS), which provides the Scheme's audit requirements, has undergone three reviews over the last six years. The focus of this standard-setting procedure is firmly fixed on supporting professionals who grow and manage plants and trees to reduce the threat from notifiable plant pests and diseases.

Central to the standard-setting process is a Technical Advisory Group (TAG), which ensures the Scheme's goal of supporting the range of sectors that grow and trade plants to protect their livelihoods, the green economy and plant life in the UK and beyond.

Though the PHMS is primarily a plant biosecurity system, as a robust standard it can also act as a tool to improve general practices within an organisation.

More than a tick box exercise

The PHMS is a quality management system (QMS) which, in the simplest terms, is a clearly defined set of processes and responsibilities that should help an organisation run well. Annual audits are a key part of the Plant Healthy certification process, and QMS audits are known to help recognise potential problems before they occur, thereby significantly reducing risk.

I occasionally hear certification schemes described as tick box exercises. In practice, their value depends on how well the standard is designed. In my experience, Plant Healthy certified members embrace the PHMS and use it not only to protect their organisations from the significant threat posed by notifiable plant pests, but also to improve productivity and performance.

Drawing on survey data, interviews and case studies, here are some of the benefits Scheme members have reported from implementing the PHMS:

- Culture boost. The most frequently reported benefit of meeting the PHMS's requirements is its contribution to promoting a positive company culture. The psychological basis for this is worth exploring, possibly it is the unifying effect of all staff members, from junior employees to senior managers, working together to protect the organisation from an external threat. Also, as many of the requirements are common sense steps, people quickly see that what is being asked of them directly improves the overall running of the organisation.

> "The Plant Healthy certification process mitigates and minimises the risk of new plant pest species arriving and spreading from the retail area to the rest of the garden and beyond."
>
> ***Dr Matthew Elliot,***
> *Plant Health and Biosecurity Scientist, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh*

- Upskilling. Several members report that the training requirement has provided the basis for a formal staff training programme. This has helped employees understand their role in the business and the importance of how they relate to colleagues. In some cases, this is the first horticulture-related training that workers receive and is usually seen as an empowering process for those involved.



Wood treatment requirements of International Standards for Phytosanitary Measures (ISPM) 15 reduce the risk of spreading invasive plant pests associated with wood packaging material.

Plant Healthy

- Identifying deadwood. Systems analysis is an inherent part of becoming certified. The TAG comprises of plant health specialists and professional operators that cover the various sectors that the Scheme supports. A key role of the TAG is to ensure that the PHMS can be applied at a practical level and in doing so, it naturally identifies inefficient or redundant processes that may have built up over time.

- Learning from mistakes. The PHMS is designed to support the establishment of proactive measures for plant biosecurity. Given the nature of the phenomenon and the variety of pathways that pests can move along, on occasion, incursions may occur.

To address such setbacks positively, a root cause analysis requirement was introduced by the TAG in the latest version of the PHMS. Based on the 'five whys' concept, the process seeks to determine the root cause of a problem. This is another example of an analytical tool within the PHMS that helps to bring about corrective actions that improve operational performance, as well as site protection from notifiable and routine plant pests.



Waste management systems at Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh: certified members use the certification process to examine and improve a range of core operational practices.

> "We've learnt a huge amount from undertaking this process and look forward to developing our procedures alongside this management standard. I personally feel it is a fantastic scheme and is critical for ensuring the future of UK horticulture."
>
> ***James Hunter,***
> *General Nursery Manager, Crocus*

Other schemes and the wider biosecurity community

There are several other schemes relevant to Plant Healthy, some of which focus on general sustainability, such as the Ornamental Horticulture Assurance Scheme and ISO 14001 – Environmental Management, and the UK and Ireland Sourced and Grown scheme which is concerned specifically with tree health and provenance.

Plant Healthy seeks to relate well to other schemes, with the charity now establishing a formal benchmarking procedure to support joint audits. This should reduce auditing costs and enable many more organisations to adopt the PHMS's plant biosecurity framework.

Joining the Scheme has been described as joining a sector-wide Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) community. As a description this seems apt: when Plant Healthy Certified members trade with one another across the supply chain, not only are they protecting their businesses and the wider sector, they are also working together in a stewardship role to help prevent the introduction of new pests into the natural environment.



Plant traceability system at a quarantine facility at a Royal Horticultural Society garden: Plant Healthy members report that Plant Healthy certification improves record-keeping and pest monitoring systems.

The bottom line

Adopting the PHMS brings many benefits beyond those already discussed. Members have reported waste reduction within their organisations and reputational benefits in the marketplace. These all add up to potential financial gains. And of course, there is the primary purpose – avoiding the costs and disruption associated with a pest outbreak – which is hard to quantify. As one manager remarked: when all is said and done, the Scheme gives me peace of mind – something which is priceless.

Find out more about Plant Healthy at **planthealthy.org.uk**

> "Plant Healthy certification has become a prerequisite for procurement in the public sector, local authorities in particular. We would have lost custom if we didn't have Plant Healthy in place."
>
> ***Jamie Peacock,***
> *Operations Director, Barcham Trees*