



THE PARENT TRAP

DAVID T BINKS

In the first of a two-part series on young people in landscaping, **David T Binks** attempts to understand why the sector isn't more of a draw

Having recently exhibited at various career fairs during National Apprenticeship Week, the perennial question of what attracts young people to our industry still looms large. While watching crowds of beleaguered parents dragging their largely uninspired adolescents around in search of their 'chosen path', it became apparent that the issue of getting young people into landscaping apprenticeships perhaps lies less with the youth than it does with their parents.

Now, not all teenagers look to their parents for guidance, but their views and opinions are likely to have been formed by some level of interaction with their elders. The few glimmers of hope we had during these open days came from students who had a familial link with horticulture or landscaping – those who'd enjoyed helping parents or grandparents in the garden, or experienced the joy of growing their own plants and felt the connection with nature that working in our industry provides. So, what is potentially preventing parents from advocating a career in landscaping?

A common factor between parents of today's teenagers is that they are typically members of 'Generation X' – they were around at the birth of the internet, are comfortable with technology, have often had free university education, and aren't averse to career changes. I don't want to tar everyone with the same brush, but over the course of my time at the career fairs, it became apparent that Generation

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X's opinion of 'being a gardener' and 'getting your hands dirty' isn't a positive one, and they were vocal in dissuading their children from pursuing this route. Obviously, there is more than just one external influence at play here, but research suggests that there is a correlation between the arrival of the internet and people's decreasing interest in the natural world.

Couple this sentiment with a screen-staring 'iGen' teenager and you create the perfect storm for the position that our industry currently finds itself in: a huge skills shortage, due to a rapidly declining grassroots interest in landscaping. The need for this age group to be perpetually connected via social media – to be digitally integrated – is leading to a disconnect between them and the natural world, giving rise to what the American writer Richard Louv calls 'nature-deficit disorder'. This isn't a medical condition – rather, it is a way to describe the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature.

Clearly, there is no silver bullet to remedy this situation – that would require as colossal a cultural shift as the onset of the internet – but it's critical to try and raise awareness of the issue. At landscaping forums in recent years, the need to make clients understand the financial value of landscaping has always been a hot topic, but educating society on the social and environmental value of creating landscapes is also key – partly to reconnect people with nature, and partly to energise young people into seeing it as exciting career path. Despite decrying the effect of the internet on society, we are going to have to harness the power of social media in a bid to educate both children and adults. How this manifests itself is another conversation altogether, but we need to create a platform for making landscaping (in all its guises) accessible and a bit sexier – maybe an edgy and informative YouTube channel would work?

ABOUT DAVID T BINKS

David T Binks is managing director of Cheshire-based Landstruction, which was set up in 2010 and now has 40 employees. It has won Gold medals at RHS Chelsea and RHS Tatton Park. David also launched the Big Hedge Co., which supplies and installs mature hedging and topiary nationwide.

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