

VANESSA EASLEA

The former investment banker and current chair of the Working For Gardeners Association on her own change of career and how Covid has led to a national reassessment of our working lives

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The past few years of working disruption have seen many reassess their working lives and reconsider their careers, something Vanessa Easlea, chair of the Working For Gardeners Association (WFGA) knows all about. "I used to work in investment banking covering Asia, and travelled a huge amount, so I could only garden at the weekends. I would go into work at 6.30am and come home at 6.30pm, but any spare moment I had I would sit in the trading room and think about roses."

The WFGA was once known as the Women's Farm and Garden Association, and is best known for helping women into professional horticulture, a career path traditionally dominated by men. Its flagship scheme is WRAGS or Work and Retrain as a Gardener Scheme (formerly Women Returners to Amenity Gardening Scheme), in which career changers can dip their toe in the career-changing waters with a paid part-time placement under a head gardener.

An upheaval in her early fifties led Vanessa to become a WGFA member in 2003. "It was time to reassess my life. I joined the WGFA and got even more hooked on gardening, spending a lot of time visiting gardens and doing the WGFA workshops on how to set yourself up as a self-employed gardener, among other topics. It struck me that maybe this was something I could do professionally." In 2013 she became a trustee of the charity, and decided to apply for a placement. The charity found her a WRAGS placement at Chenies Manor in Hertfordshire, two days a week, and she went part time at the bank. "It was physically hard, especially the first few weeks. It's such a huge change from an office job. But that's why the scheme works so well. It's part time, and paid, so you can try it without sacrificing everything else. You're not starting in a classroom and thinking 'I could do this' and then getting into a job and finding that it's too physical, that working out in the elements is too tough, that it's seven hours a day out of doors and it's too much."

For Vanessa it worked (although, she says, "I really ached for a few weeks"), and at the end of her placement she resigned at the bank, and became a full-time gardener. In 2017, she also became chair of WFGA, and set about helping this 120-year-old organisation to modernise. The name change was a controversial one, with many different opinions among the membership, which was polled before it was carried out. The organisation has an incredible history, supporting women into horticulture since 1899 and helping to establish the Women's Land Army in the First World War. "The

problem was we had become all about the history, and I wanted us to reposition ourselves so that people would understand that we were the solution to a very modern problem. We also had men applying for WRAGS and we wanted to be able to open up to them." The name change was approved by the membership and now around 15 per cent of members are men. She has also pushed the organisation forward with a new website and a social media presence, and forged links with the Royal Horticultural Society and National Garden Scheme. "We needed to start talking to other organisations. We have a unique offering and people are pleased to help us promote it."

Then, when Covid hit, and many people had time to look at their lives and their careers, the WGFA saw a huge increase in membership. "During Covid everybody suddenly wanted to become

a gardener. Our membership shot through the roof, because everybody wanted to learn more about their own patch or start growing, and many also wanted a career change." Graduates of the scheme have gone on to run their own garden business, work in plant nurseries and become head gardeners.

There is now often a waiting list for placements, particularly in urban areas. "Nurses, police, civil servants, lawyers, accountants, lots of different professions are wanting to move into horticulture. There's been a sea change," says Vanessa. The WFGA is perfectly placed to help them, but the challenge now is finding enough gardens to fulfil demand. "I would love to encourage any large gardens

to consider it. We ask that they pay the National Living Wage, and in return they get support from us and a really enthusiastic trainee, someone who is keen, and will work really hard. Career changers bring so much to the gardens they work in."

This is something Vanessa has proved herself. After her initial year at Chenies Manor she was taken on one day a week, and has since built up her own gardening business, planting up and caring for local gardens ("I often walk to them, with my trolley of plants and tools," she says) as well as volunteering at Horatio's Garden, RNOH Stanmore, where she helped plant up Tom Stuart-Smith's design. "Changing careers has been wonderful for me," she says. "Following my heart to work with plants was the right thing to do." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

The WFGA offers workshops, garden tours, practical skills days, access to horticultural jobs, access to bursaries to support career development. For more information visit wfga.org.uk

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