



Part of the display garden at the nursery



Checking through some Cordylines

Retail therapy

Digswell Nurseries near Welwyn Garden City not only provides a wide selection of competitively priced plants but offers students with learning disabilities and mental health issues the chance to gain a wide range of horticultural knowledge. Philippa Pearson finds out about the rewarding work being done

WHATEVER your gardening skill level, we all appreciate the therapeutic feeling that gardening gives us. From pottering around to sowing seeds and propagating plants, working in the garden gives a great feel-good factor that brings a warm glow of well-being.

These benefits of working in horticulture are brilliantly put into practice at Digswell Nurseries which

combine horticultural training for those with specific needs with community projects at the site. Situated off the old A1 between Welwyn Garden City and Welwyn, Digswell Nurseries opened in 1995 as a centre to provide horticultural training for people with learning difficulties. By its tenth birthday the centre had surpassed its earlier goals and was able to offer this training to all vulnerable groups in the local community

and has been thriving ever since.

As part of the Saint John of God Care Services, an internationally recognised religious order providing health and social care to millions of sick, vulnerable and disadvantaged people across the world, Digswell Nurseries are dedicated to offering friendly yet knowledgeable training and support through work experience to their students, who come from across Hertfordshire. The centre is

Gardening



Potting on seedlings

different to other day services as it is a work-based environment where students work together, whatever their disability, to grow plants while developing work and life skills. Most come for a full day at the nursery and enjoy working hard to achieve high standards. A recent partnership with North Hertfordshire College assists students who have been out of work for a sustained period through a scheme known as 'Work

Placements for Learners'. This 12-week placement combines literacy and numeracy skills learnt at the college and additional horticultural skills learned in the work-based environment at Digswell.

Horticulturist David Lingard joined the small team at Digswell last spring and finds the work very rewarding. 'Every day is different here and the students are fantastic people to work with. We are quite unique in having a retail outlet as well as growing for trade requirements so the work is varied and interesting for all of us.'

The nursery has a contract with Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council for growing bedding plants for roundabouts and other public spaces and around 200,000 plants are grown each year for this. Many local schools, businesses and other

organisations make use of Digswell's plants each year for their bedding displays and plants are available for sale throughout the year. Summer and winter bedding plants make up the majority of

Every day is different here and the students are fantastic people to work with

plants on offer plus there are a good range of small shrubs and perennials; at Christmas, a mass of home-grown poinsettias are a cheery sight to the indoor sales area. 'We grow around 90 per cent of all our plants, either raising them from seed or from plug plants,' says David as we walk around the greenhouses and polytunnels.

A newly developed coffee shop offers local community groups and special needs schools and colleges the chance to operate this on a rotational basis whilst giving them valuable work and business



Deadheading plants



David Lingard explains how the machinery works to a student



Students at the new café

experience. Lakeside School, a special school for pupils with complex and severe learning difficulties in Welwyn Garden City, currently opens the coffee shop each Wednesday.

Another new addition to the nursery is a stunning pergola built last January by managers and staff from the Southern Region of Saint John of God Care Services on a team building event. Situated near the nursery's display

visitors. The range of plants will be extended, too. 'We hope to grow a wider range of perennials, shrubs, herbs and houseplants,' says David, 'and more events are planned in addition to the popular Hanging Basket Weekend in May and Christmas festivities each December.'

Digswell Nurseries is a special place to visit for your plant requirements at any time of the year. The care, attention and dedication of the staff and students mean your plants are grown with passion and each purchase makes a valuable contribution to the work of the charity.

The care, attention and dedication of staff and students mean your plants are grown with passion

gardens, the pergola offers a tranquil place to sit, relax and enjoy the gardens which are maintained by the students. Digswell Nurseries occupies a large site and plans for other areas, hopefully to coincide with the centre's 15th anniversary in 2010, include creating a conservation area for wildlife, a play area and a picnic site for

RHS Silver-Gilt medal winner Philippa Pearson is a garden designer and professional horticulturalist. Tel: 01767 651253 or email Philippa at gardens@hertfordshirelife.co.uk

GET IN TOUCH

Digswell Nurseries
B197 Old Great North Road
Welwyn Garden City
AL8 7SR
01707 334076
E-mail
horticulture@sjogcareservices.org.uk

Opening Times
10am to 4pm
Monday-Friday all year round;
Monday-Sunday, April to June and
December; Monday-Saturday, October