

HEALTH CAMPAIGN No one enters horticulture thinking about skin cancer. Yet for an increasing number of professionals, the consequences of sun exposure are becoming impossible to ignore. **Mercy Morris** and **Emma Burns** focus on a new survey into the risk of skin cancer in the horticultural workforce.

Skin cancer: a growing concern



A new survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Horticulture has laid bare the extent of the risk. Gardeners, growers, landscapers and those working outdoors with a high exposure to UV radiation are amongst the most at risk.

In the survey of 718 respondents across the sector, including production horticulture, botanic gardens, garden design, landscaping and education, 12% reported having been diagnosed with skin cancer. Most notably, those with the fairest skin tones (Fitzpatrick Type I)¹ and men were significantly more likely to be affected, and behind each of these statistics is a real story of diagnosis, treatment, recovery and reflection.

A preventable crisis

Over 17,000 cases of melanoma skin cancer are reported every year, and according to Cancer Research UK, 86% of these cases are preventable. Yet the survey revealed a worrying picture of sun exposure habits within the horticulture workforce:

- 71% reported being sunburned at least once per year.
- Nearly 30% of sunscreen users rarely or never reapply during the day.
- 50% say sunscreen is too expensive.
- 92% would be more likely to use it regularly if it were 20% cheaper.

With 87% of respondents calling for VAT exemption on sunscreen, there is a compelling opportunity for policymakers to support prevention through legislation. Sunscreen, while essential for outdoor workers, is still classified as a cosmetic item and subject to 20% VAT in the UK – a classification that fails to recognise its role as protective equipment in high-exposure professions such as horticulture. Removing VAT would not only reduce a key barrier to regular use, especially for self-employed or seasonal workers, but would also send a powerful public health

message: that skin cancer prevention is not optional, it's vital.

For many in horticulture, though, the cost isn't just monetary; it's emotional, physical, and professional. Whilst conducting the survey, the CIH spoke with several horticultural professionals, who were kind enough to share their stories.

Voices from the industry

Jennifer Warner, a botanical horticulturist at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, was diagnosed with Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC) while training at Audley End. She recalls the scar left behind after surgery as “angry-looking and much larger than the lesion itself”. But the impact went deeper: “If I had gone in sooner, perhaps I wouldn't have such a whopper of a scar.” Her advice for others working outdoors? “You're hopefully going to

have a long career in horticulture and many years of sun exposure – play the long game and look after your skin!”

For Brian Williams, a nursery owner, melanoma had already spread to his lymph nodes by the time of diagnosis in 2024. “I have tried to avoid any impact on work,” he says, “but going forward I realise this may become more of a challenge.”

Elle, a Head Gardener, reflects on her delay: “I didn't get mine checked immediately... I regret that now. Even though my treatment went well, it might not have spread if I'd acted sooner.”

These stories illustrate a common theme: skin cancer is not rare in this sector, and even those who are diligent about sun safety can be caught off guard.

Risk factors and reality checks

Skin cancer doesn't just affect sunbathers. It affects shade-seekers, hat-wearers and even those who never ‘burn.’

Dom Thompson-Talbot, a garden designer, (above) describes himself as a lifelong sun-avoider: “I'm a shadow-lurker!” Yet he developed a BCC on his neck, likely triggered by one forgotten patch during a long-distance walk.

Meanwhile, Christine Whatley, another garden designer, was diagnosed with melanoma in her armpit, a place rarely exposed to the sun. “My message to others: check for moles anywhere, not just where you've had sun exposure,” she says.

Sarah Morgan, a horticulturist and garden designer, emphasises the cumulative impact of childhood sun exposure. “I was one of those fair-skinned, feral outdoor children with no sunscreen,” says Morgan, who's had multiple BCCs surgically removed.

A call for cultural shift

The survey found a striking gender divide: while





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74% of women regularly wear sunscreen between May and September, only 39% of men do the same. Moreover, men are three times more likely to 'rarely' or 'never' wear sunscreen.

The top reasons people gave for not wearing sunscreen? Many didn't expect to burn (36%), found it too messy (26%), or simply forgot (23%). But awareness is growing, and changing behaviour will take more than just education; it will take a cultural shift.

Sarah Morgan (below) now includes sun protection in risk assessments and plans the working day to ensure her team is not working in full sun when it is strongest.

The good news is that momentum is building. Over 90% of survey respondents said they would seek medical advice if they noticed something suspicious. But 41% cited GP appointment difficulties as a barrier, and 18% didn't want to 'burden' the NHS.

Employer responsibility

The survey showed a clear correlation between company size and the provision of sunscreen:

- 70% of employers with more than 250 staff provide sunscreen.
- This drops to just 33% among those employing five or fewer people.

In a profession with high UV exposure, this disparity is problematic.

"It should be mandatory," says Stephen Hackett, a retired gardener. "Employers should provide sunscreen and shaded rest areas." He's not alone in thinking this: many respondents echoed the need for better support from employers, particularly for freelance and seasonal workers.



Advice gleaned

Across all the stories collected, there was universal agreement on the basics:

- Use a high-factor sunscreen and reapply.
- Wear wide-brimmed hats and UV-protective clothing.
- Check your skin regularly and take photos to track changes.
- Seek help early, and don't be afraid to insist on a second opinion.

As Andrew Poole, a farmer and agronomist, puts it: "Don't think that because you work outside often that you'll be accustomed to the sun's rays and that you won't need protection."

Rae Wilkinson was careful "to wear sun protection while working outside over many years", but she neglected to protect her ears, which is where she developed an infiltrative basal cell carcinoma. She feels "frustrated not to have taken more care. It has highlighted to me the danger of sun exposure".

Moving forward

This survey and the stories it inspired are more than a snapshot, they are a wake-up call.

They tell us that knowledge alone isn't enough. Access, affordability, and cultural attitudes all play a part. Prevention must become embedded in the professional culture of horticulture, just like wearing gloves or steel-toe boots.

There is work to be done by policymakers, employers, professional bodies, and individuals. But there is also wisdom, resilience, and determination across the horticulture sector.

As one anonymous respondent wrote: "It's not just about preventing skin cancer. It's about making sure we can all enjoy long, fulfilling careers in the gardens we love – safely." ●

Footnote

1. www.uhd.nhs.uk/uploads/about/docs/our_publications/patient_information_leaflets/dermatology/The-Fitzpatrick-Skin-Type-Chart.pdf

Authors' note

This article draws upon data from the 2025 *Skin Cancer and the Horticulture Workforce Survey* and personal testimonies collected by the Chartered Institute of Horticulture. Our thanks to all contributors for their openness and honesty.

Mercy Morris

Mercy (below left) keeps the hidden machinery of Plant Network running. She holds an RHS MHort. and an MSc in Ethnobotany. Her previous roles include Conservation Manager at Plant Heritage, Research Assistant at the University of Kent and Team Leader at RBG Kew, Wakehurst Place. Mercy has a National Plant Collection of *Chlorophytum comosum* cultivars and has opened under the National Gardens Scheme for houseplants. When she is not doing planty things she may be running, cycling, sea-swimming or cat-wrangling. If you join Plant Network Zoom meetings, you will undoubtedly meet her cat, Tiberius.

Emma Burns

Plant Network Administrator Emma (below right) works within our community by focusing on membership systems, administrative processes, and social media. With over a decade of experience in business support and operations, she's passionate about community-building and uses her organisational skills to help horticulturists stay connected and supported. Though not from a horticultural background herself, Emma is inspired to help those who are. She ensures that the infrastructure is in place so our members can focus on what they do best: grow, conserve, and care for plants. Outside of work, she loves hiking in the outdoors with her husband and baby boy.

