

Volunteering for HDRA

Written by Emma and Dave Marsh (contributed by HDRA's The Organic Way)

Volunteering can be an incredibly rewarding experience for both the volunteer and the organisation. Emma and Dave Marsh have been volunteering at Ryton Organic Gardens for the past six months. Here they share some of their experiences over this time.

In 2003 we decided that enough was enough. We were both in jobs, based in the London area, which involved selling our souls on a daily basis.

We knew that growing organically was our passion in life, but having both obtained degrees previously in unrelated subjects, more time studying wasn't really on the cards. We had spent years reading up on horticulture and working on our allotment; now it was time to get the practical experience. How it began

At the end of 2003 the resignations went in. As members of HDRA, we knew that the best place to gain practical horticultural experience was Ryton Organic Gardens. We first contacted HSL and explained our reasons for wanting to learn while at the same time helping HDRA.

We subsequently met Neil Munro (Head of HSL), and then David Whitehead (Gardens Manager for Ryton and Yalding) and Thalia Nunis (Horticultural Field Manager). A month later we were at work three to four days a week in each of two HDRA departments: Gardens and HSL. We have been at Ryton for six months now and hope to be able to stay for another six - finances permitting. Terms of agreement

At the start we agreed a minimum term of six months with a view to increasing this to twelve if all went well. At any stage we knew we could talk to the relevant HDRA staff if we had any reservations or comments, and the same was true for them.

There is no accommodation available 'in house', so volunteers need to live fairly locally and be able to support themselves. We don't get paid, nor do we receive any allowances or expenses. However, we do receive a free lunch for every full day worked - morning coffee if we work only half a day. This arrangement works well as the food in the restaurant is excellent; the only problem is motivating ourselves to move afterwards.