

Allotment Gardening Guide

Introduction

An allotment is a year-round activity that brings great rewards – satisfaction from tasks well done, sociability, and a bounteous crop of fruit and vegetables every year.

It is not a light undertaking: inevitably most plots are overgrown when they are returned to the council for letting, and even a small plot may require months of preparation – clearing vegetation, removing “leftovers”, digging and weeding the soil, and preparing beds. Each and every year the soil must be improved; the winter weeds removed; beds prepared; seeds sown; seedlings watered and fed; and then you start gardening in earnest.

This guide isn't a replacement for gardening books, magazines and local advice: it addresses some basics of allotment gardening so you can make a successful start and develop an engrossing hobby.

General information on management

On Ealing' council-owned and managed allotments, rent is due on 1st October each year and it is your responsibility to ensure that it is paid promptly. On sites with local management rent is usually collected on site, and details of the arrangements are advertised on site. On sites without local management, a letter sent to each tenant advises how rent should be paid. A large number of tenancies are allowed to lapse each year, so the council's policy is to assume a plot is no longer required if the rent is not received by 10th November; if you fail to pay by this time, you may find your allotment is re-let.

A copy of the rules is provided to each new tenant, and can be viewed on and downloaded from the council's website, www.ealing.gov.uk. If you are in doubt as to what is expected of you and what is permissible, please refer to the rules first and always use common sense and consideration for your neighbours both on and off the allotments.

Initial investment

Many gardeners start by making a significant investment – a new shed, greenhouse, a range of shiny tools and lots of gardening goodies. It is easy to spend hundreds of pounds on an activity that will have such an impact on your time that you cannot be sure it will suit your lifestyle. It is far better to start with a few inherited, borrowed or otherwise second-hand tools (a fork, spade, rake, hoe, trowel, and a watering can with a rose are a good set of tools that will get you a long way) and slowly develop your interest and expenditure.

Remember also that allotments are open to a large number of people (both ploholders and others) and your allotment is not the place to keep anything of real value – strimmers and rotavators are particularly popular amongst thieves.

Non-cultivation

The most common breach of the rules is failure to maintain and cultivate the allotment. Each tenant is, by law, given a period of three months to bring the plot into use, and this protected period is renewed each October 1st. During this period the council will not issue a non-cultivation notice to the tenant, but that does not mean that the plot is considered to be in an acceptable state. Visit regularly and often, look honestly at neighbouring plots and aim for yours to be amongst the better, more advanced plots. If you receive a letter, please think honestly about the time you have to deal with the allotment and either use that time to bring the plot into use or consider reducing the size of your plot – if you don't, the council or local management group may make the decision for you.

Absentee gardening

Absentee gardeners are those who, generally on receipt of a warning, pay someone to dig over the plot, hoping that this will get them off the hook for the season. Allotments are community ventures in which everyone is expected to play a part, not least in helping with the maintenance of the site (it's in the rules). Absentee gardeners play no part in the community and cause ill-feeling as well as failing to reap the benefits of having an allotment.

There's nothing wrong with getting a little help, but the council expects that the plothead will be in attendance and will be the main contributor to the work on an allotment; where this is not so, it will be assumed that the plothead has neither the time nor interest to maintain the allotment and the tenancy will be reduced or ended. Please note also that you are responsible for the safety and actions of anyone you invite to the allotment: if you're not there and something goes wrong, you might find yourself facing not a complaint but a claim for compensation.

Nuisance

This takes a wealth of forms, but there is a noticeable increase in complaints immediately following the issue of non-cultivation notices. This is another reason to get on top of your plot sooner rather than later – having to deal with a major clearance at the same time as sowing or planting crops leads people to anti-social quick fixes: smoking bonfires, dumped material and such like, as discussed in the rules.

The uncontrolled behaviour of children can quickly lead to discontent. The council very much welcomes the inclusion of children as part of the allotment community, but please don't assume that because the allotment is fenced and gated that you can treat it as a play area for children. Apart from the obvious safety concerns (glass, sharp tools, etc) youngsters are apt to see a playground where others see a carefully tended plot invested with hours of love and attention.

Ill-timed bonfires, dumped rubbish and unruly children are typical complaints, but there are many others and they can all be avoided with a little forethought and consideration for your fellow gardeners and neighbours around the allotment site.

Planning the plot

Whatever the size, your plot will take more time than you expect and provide less space than you need. It's as well to start small and only expand when you've mastered what you have, as the council's policy is to allow successful gardeners to expand to around 250 sq metres if they have started with less.

Before deciding on where anything will go, remember that the paths around your plot are there for all to use – and some have water services running underneath, in which case wide access may be needed – and the paths mustn't be obstructed. Don't rely on the advice of neighbours when it comes to such things as siting sheds: speak to your site manager.

The council discourages the use of fences around the perimeter of plots. If you want a fence over which to train runner beans, vines or similar, this should be kept well back from the plot edge. Similarly sheds and greenhouses should be kept back. You must receive permission from the site manager (or the council's allotments manager) before building a shed or greenhouse; this is unlikely to be refused if you're proposing a standard flat-pack shed or greenhouse. If you're planning to plant trees or bushes, ensure that you allow sufficient space for them to reach full size without interfering with paths or neighbours.

Making compost is a vitally important part of allotment gardening, and this works best and quickest in full sun – don't relegate your bin to a shady corner. And allow more space than you think you need, you'll find you want to make a lot of compost.

Many gardeners chose to grow at least some crops in raised beds. These simple shallow wooden frames lift the soil by around 15cm, allowing soil to drain freely and warm earlier in spring, but perhaps the biggest benefit is a psychological one: a bed of around 1m x 3m seems much easier to prepare than a similar area of open ground.

Plot Preparation

Your plot will have been inspected for dangers, and either these will have been removed or you will be alerted to them on the tenancy confirmation form. Generally your first action will be to remove anything that makes the plot potentially unsafe (such as broken glass, which is not uncommon), and to dispose of this at one of the council's waste and recycling sites.

The tenancy agreement will also tell you of any features that must remain, such as a valuable fruit tree or a serviceable greenhouse or shed. It is a condition of your tenancy that you do not remove anything that is listed as a permanent feature in the agreement, nor should you seek to sell a shed or greenhouse acquired in this manner.

To prepare the ground, start by cutting down the vegetation, which will make the subsequent digging much easier. If there is a large area to clear, consider hiring a powerful brushcutter. Don't be tempted to burn the fresh cuttings, they'll smoke and cause a nuisance; compost them instead, being sure to remove all soil from the roots first.

Once the soil is exposed it should be dug over. Don't be tempted to rotavate as this damages the soil structure and will cause perennial weeds to spread (each piece of couch grass root will happily form a viable new plant). Double digging (loosening soil to the depth of

around 30cm, double the depth of a spade) is widely recommended and there are many books which explain the process in detail. Digging introduces air, improves drainage, and allows you to remove weeds and roots – be as thorough as you can, paying particular attention to perennials such as couch grass and bindweed, and reckon on around an hour per square metre.

When you have dug and weeded an area, cover it to prevent weeds recolonizing. Geotextiles are ideal, and are available quite inexpensively from web traders and building supplies companies, generally in 2x50m rolls. (The materials available from garden centres are flimsy and best avoided.) An alternative, if the season is right and you are not planting crops immediately, is to sow the area with a green manure – see below.

If you are building raised beds, it is useful to make a geotextile cover to fit each bed and to use wood chippings (where available) to make dry paths between the beds.

Use anything you have to hand (old bottles filled with water, for example) to weigh the geotextile in place, as even a slight wind will lift it and carry it away.

Plot Preparation checklist

1. Allow **an hour per square metre** for basic preparation
2. Remove rubbish and dangers
3. Brushcut vegetation to ground level
4. Decide on areas for compost, shed and/or greenhouse
5. Cover bare soil with geotextile or similar
6. Dig well and remove as much root material as possible
7. Add roots (with NO soil) to the compost pile
8. Re-cover any soil that is not soon to be sown or planted

Soil conditioning

An ideal soil will hold moisture but allow excess water to drain; will be friable, holding pockets of air to encourage beneficial bacterial activity; and will have a broad range of plant nutrients and trace elements. Adding well-rotted compost to soil will improve it in all these ways. This can be done by top-dressing an area (spreading a layer of compost on the surface) in autumn and letting worms take the material into the soil over winter or, if you want to use the soil soon, lightly forking compost into the top 15cm.

Plant growth and the action of sunlight reduce the humus (composted vegetable matter) in the soil so it should be conditioned in this way every year. In your first year you may need to buy in some compost, in which case a popular and fairly inexpensive solution is bags of rotted horse manure mixed with spent mushroom compost.

Alternatively, plant a green manure in any ground you don't intend to use for a few months, and dig this in once it has flowered and before it sets seed.

There's a little more on composting and green manures below.

Composting

There are books devoted to the subject of composting, and no plot is too small to make compost – if you don't, what are you doing with all the waste material that arises from gardening? And how are you going to keep the soil in good condition?

The traditional approach on allotments is to pile all the allotment waste into a heap and wait; sometimes for years. Heat is quickly lost, slowing the process down; wind dries and rain saturates the material, either way preventing decomposition. The material produced is a good soil improver, aiding drainage and storing moisture, but provides little in the way of nutrients. The majority of allotment gardeners following this method either give up on composting or regard it primarily as long-term storage for garden waste.

A bin helps contain the heat and moisture and generally reduces the time taken. It is necessary to turn the compost regularly to reintroduce air, and it may be necessary to water the material, particularly in warmer months. Monitoring the mix of soft green and woody brown material is critical, as too much of either can lead to a suspension of bacterial activity. A very well insulated bin will reduce the time taken still further, and the higher temperatures reached (sometimes 50C) will kill off some of the weed seeds and plant diseases, but proprietary bins are expensive and small, and the process still takes around six months.

Anaerobic fermentation is a short process that turns any kitchen waste into a product that can safely be buried for rapid decomposition (in around six weeks) in the soil. It requires an airtight container and bacteria-inoculated bran for the initial fermentation, which takes two to three weeks, after which the material (which looks unchanged but has undergone a significant transformation) is buried in a part of the allotment that you don't intend to use for several weeks. Alternatively, the fermented material can be added to partially-decomposed allotment waste to fuel a very high temperature (60C+) rapid compost pile. The fermentation process makes the kitchen waste unattractive to vermin and foxes, whether it is buried in soil or in a compost bin.

Green manures

Green manures are plants grown to both protect and improve the soil. Whilst growing they create a canopy that acts as a mulch for otherwise bare soil. When you need the ground, simply dig the plants into the soil where they are growing and they will quickly decompose, improving structure and in some cases adding nutrients.

Many plants can be grown as green mulches: amongst the better known are Phacelia (*Phacelia tanacetifolium*) which can be sown at any time from March to October, is quick to establish, produces a good bulk of material and its flowers attract pollinators in summer; and Crimson Clover (*Trifolium incarnatum*) which, sown in August or early September, will provide soil protection over winter and fix nitrogen from the air to benefit the cropping plants that follow, and is tolerant of Ealing's clay soil which frequently becomes waterlogged in winter. Garden centres and seed catalogues often carry green manure seeds, and there's usually a handy table explaining when seeds can be planted, the conditions different varieties enjoy and the benefits they bring to the soil and subsequent crops.

Watering

Where there is a water supply on site, water is available from April to October inclusive. Hosepipes may not be connected to the supply – this is a legal requirement imposed by the Water Supply (Water Fittings) Regulations 1999 and using a hosepipe could result in a criminal prosecution by the water supplier. There are various ways of lightening the task of watering, and these also benefit your plants.

The best approach to watering – which admittedly takes time – is to minimise the amount you need to do by improving the soil condition (making compost or growing green manures) and by protecting the surface (mulching). When you do water, do so late in the evening so the water soaks in rather than evaporating in the heat of the sun. Water the soil around plant roots, as watering the leaves (unless you're using a foliar feed) helps spread some plant diseases. (This doesn't apply to seedlings – these are fragile and shallow rooted and you'll need to water the entire bed with a fine rose to avoid washing the seedlings out of the soil.)

Rainwater is better than water from the supply tanks, so consider adding guttering to your shed and collect rainwater in a water butt. If you can't do this, then water from a tank (many sites have automatically-replenished water tanks) is better than water fresh out of the tap. Tapwater can be much colder than the soil temperature, causing a shock to plants, and it contains chlorine that kills beneficial soil organisms which help feed the plants. If tapwater is allowed to stand for a few hours (such as in a tank) then the chlorine quickly evaporates.

Mulching

A mulch is a layer of material spread over the soil to protect it. It prevents wind drying the soil; the sun from drawing out moisture and breaking down humus; heavy rain from compacting soil or washing it away; and air-borne weed seeds from germinating. This reduces the amount of weeding and watering required, benefitting both gardener and plants.

The mulch could be a layer of geotextile with holes cut into it through which cropping plants grow. It is light, doesn't rot, and is easily stored for re-use. It can fray easily when cut, so it may be worth gluing loose edges (or melting them with a very gentle flame).

Woodchip is a popular mulch (and is a good material for paths between beds) and it is freely delivered to many sites. A 10cm layer on a bed is very effective protection, but you should add additional nitrogen fertilizer (Growmore or bonemeal, for example): woodchip ties up nitrogen as it is broken down by bacteria. In the autumn it can be left to break down and improve the soil over winter.

Green manures can be grown as a living mulch, either on their own or amongst taller cropping plants. The type of plant used depends on the season, and generally you don't want to grow a green manure that will seed whilst your principal crop is still growing: it is difficult to remove the green manure plants without disturbing the others. And you shouldn't intercrop green manures among plants that are susceptible to fungal diseases, such as tomatoes – the damp, still air trapped by the green manure assists the fungal spores get a hold of your valuable plants.

Cultivation calendar

When you first take on a plot, you'll be guided more by the tasks at hand than an annual guide. And once you're established, you'll probably have found books that suit your style of allotment gardening. What follows is simply a month-by-month rough guide to an ideal progression. It starts in October because that is really the end of one gardening year and the start of another. If you start at a different time, you can make adjustments.

The calendar is very brief and doesn't attempt to tell you when to sow and harvest each crop, not least because different varieties vary in their requirements, but if you take away one idea from this calendar let it be that **plot preparation should be completed by March** each year or you'll be playing catch-up throughout the growing season – and this can greatly reduce your enjoyment of the allotment.

October

Apart from overwintering crops such as some varieties of leeks and brassicas, most of your harvest will be gathered by October. This is the time to dig up and compost the remains of plants, and to prepare any beds that will be used for growing newly-planted overwintering crops such as Japanese onions, garlic, broad beans and late-planted green manures.

This is also rent collection month. Every year a handful of people lose their allotments by failing to pay their rent.

November

Generally there'll be a frost by November, killing off all but hardy plants. Daylight is scarce and there is little obvious growth, but frost-tolerant plants will often still be putting down roots. Unfortunately that's true of most perennial weeds, so the sooner you deal with these the better.

December

This is often the best month to dig soil. It is cool enough that you'll work up less of a sweat, it ensures better drainage through the wetter months to come, and few of the weed seeds exposed by digging will germinate at this time of year. But if it's a wet December, leave the digging for a dry spell.

January

Assuming the soil has been dug over, winter frosts and rain will help break it up into a fine tilth, but if December was wet then January may be the time to catch up. Otherwise it is a good time to tidy up, carry out repairs, and take rubbish away.

February

There are a few crops that may be planted towards the end of February, though on our heavy soil these are generally best planted in raised beds that drain better. It's a good time to spread compost on the soil, and to start cutting and turning in any well-established green manures. Indoors, in a warm and stable temperature, sow trays of plants that benefit from a long growing season – tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, etc.

March

This is the last chance to get the allotment prepared for the main planting season in April. In an ideal world you'll have everything prepared by the start of the month, but for many this is a frantic last chance to catch up. Fail now and you'll be catching up for the whole of the spring and summer.

Dig in any remaining green manures, chopping them up well with a sharp spade so they decompose quickly, and top-dress the soil with fertiliser. (Doing so earlier often results in winter rain washing all the fertiliser away.)

April

This is the start of full-on gardening. Most crops are sown or planted in April and May, and you really want to have all the preparation out of the way before April.

May

The greenhouse (if you have one) will be getting crowded and require almost daily watering, but don't be tempted by a few warm days to plant out sensitive plants. Instead, take them out during the day to harden them, then put them back overnight for protection – it still gets very cold overnight in May. Hardy varieties should all be sown or planted out by now.

June

Plant out all the frost-sensitive plants at the start of the month – although it is not unheard-of that we have a frost in June, it is generally light and the warmth in the soil minimises damage. Some April sowings will already be producing a harvest, and most plants will by now be showing good growth. Keep successional sowings going – lettuce planted in April will be ready for harvest by now, and you should sow a few seeds every couple of weeks.

July

July is a good time to cut down on nitrogen-rich fertilisers (which primarily encourage green growth) and move to fertilisers aimed at improving flowering – tomatoes, beans, aubergines, corn, anything that flowers to produce a fruit or seed for harvest.

August

You'll have little time for anything but harvesting this month, but spare some time to keep tomatoes tied up, pinched out, and sprayed against blight. Most allotment-holders grow tomatoes, and in most years, most tomato plants are lost to this rapidly-spreading disease. A simple fortnightly spray prevents this loss.

As soon as a crop is ready and harvested, remove the plants and sow a green manure. Some will grow sufficiently quickly that they can be harvested in time to free the soil for an October/November planting of edible crops.

September

This is the final month for major harvesting, though there are some plants that will continue to produce crops for some weeks yet. It is the last month for planting most green manures.