

Starting a New Allotment

Many people don't know where to start when they are faced with an overgrown allotment. It's a daunting project if you have never grown vegetables or fruit before, or have never watched your parents or grandparents on their vegetable plots.

Don't be intimidated by the old hands who spend most days on their neat and tidy plots. Remember, each journey must start with a single step. . . .

You will need to know your soil type to get the best out of it - for example, clay is very fertile. It is good at holding water and nutrients but may need hard work to get into workable condition. Sandy soil is easy to work, will be easier to clear of weeds and warms up quickly in spring. However, it will take a while to improve because it has a big appetite for organic matter. It is also a good idea to carry out a simple Ph test to see whether your soil is acid or alkaline.

Buy good quality tools to last a lifetime if you can afford them. If you are on a budget, look for good old tools in second-hand shops or at car boot sales.

You will need - Spade, Fork, Hoe, Rake, Hand fork, Hand trowel.

If you haven't got a secure shed to keep them in, take them home with you or hide them on the plot under the compost heap.

Plan your plot on paper. Take your time to do this. You will need space for compost heaps/bins, manure heaps, storage areas for pots, canes etc.

You might want to plant crops like rhubarb or raspberries which need a permanent place as they are perennial.

Flowers are an important part of the garden, can provide cut flowers for the home, and will attract pest-eating insects. .

If you want fruit trees, try small types such as cordons or fans.

You may want to put up a shed, greenhouse or polytunnel and don't forget to leave a work and sitting space outside your shed .

Always check the allotment site regulations before doing anything permanent on your plot, such as planting fruit trees, keeping poultry, constructing sheds, greenhouses, polytunnels, ponds etc as there may be restrictions.

Getting started

Don't panic if you are faced with a completely overgrown allotment.

Cover the plot with a weed controlling fabric, or plastic sheet, while you deal with a small area at a time. This will help you feel more in control. Cut the high weeds down with a strimmer or shears, then cover the rest with black plastic sheet.

Weigh the sheet down with bricks and stones - the wind can be very strong on an open site.

Old carpet used to be the 'in' material for mulch but is now regarded as having big disadvantages.

If you hire a rotovator and break up the topsoil with it, don't forget that :-

- you will still have to tackle perennial weeds such as mares tails and couch grass afterwards -

.... you will need to cover the prepared areas with a mulch to prevent the weeds returning while you get ready to plant your own crops.

Don't dig if the soil is wet - it compacts it and destroys its structure.

Put annual weeds on the compost heap; put the roots and seed heads of perennial weeds in black plastic bags (their leaves can be composted). Leave them in the bags for a year then put the bags' contents on the compost heap...or take them home for the recycle bin.

If you start in spring or early summer, grow potatoes through your mulch. Cut a cross in the plastic and plant through the hole.

You can divide your plot as you clear it into beds about 4ft - 4½ft (1 - 1½m) wide with paths 12 - 18ins wide between them...you will compact these paths as you walk on them...frequent hoeing of the paths will keep the weeds under control.

This will help you see progress as you clear, and will also keep your soil from being trodden on and compacted as you can reach from either side of the bed to weed and plant it.

Beds can also help you to rotate crops. Rotation helps keep up soil fertility and keep disease at bay.

Plan your vegetables to grow what your family and friends like. Easy crops to start with are potatoes, beetroot, spinach, lettuce, french beans, broad beans...radishes grow very quickly and you will have some early success...for winter, plant leeks, purple sprouting broccoli, early japanese onions.

Some Useful techniques

- Protect new plants with plastic bottle 'cloches'
- During dry weather water the bottom of a seed drill before sowing seed. Cover with dry soil.
- Sow and raise plants indoors in cell trays, pots and boxes for a head start. Transplants will be stronger.
- Always water seedlings before and after transplanting.
- Try to choose pest and disease resistant varieties e.g. blight resistant potatoes.
- Make a note of what you plant and where you plant it. This makes planning easier the following year.
- If you only have limited time to spend on your plot, grow crops that don't need regular attention such as sweet corn, onions, garlic, potatoes and pumpkins.
- Keep using the hoe and keep it sharp. Hoeing makes a loose top layer of soil which reduces water loss and prevents weed seed germination.
- Buy manure in autumn and winter. Cover it and leave it to rot down for use in the spring.
- Cover empty beds in the winter with well rotted leaf mould or compost, especially for carrots and parsnips.
- For your runner beans, dig a trench in autumn and fill with kitchen and green waste over the winter.
 This will give food and moisture to the beans when planted on it.
- Add compost to the soil when you can...bought or home made. Over wintering green manure can improve plant growth...plant in autumn, dig it in in the spring before planting your crops.

...and check out the information on - “ No Dig Allotments “ - many gardeners have great success these days without having to resort to labour intensive double digging of the plot and endless turning over of the soil...the No Dig Allotment can be very successful.

...and above all...enjoy your gardening.