

NSALG's Top Ten tips to allotment gardening

1

First things first: Congratulations on obtaining your plot! Don't do too much digging straight away; the best time to start on your plot is in the autumn, but this will of course depend on when you get it. Start off at a steady pace: we recommend half hour a day, this should be sufficient to keep your plot tidy and weed free. If you can't make it every day, then you can put the hours in at the weekend. If your plot is overgrown, cut it back to a short stubble before you start digging. Watch you don't over do it, should you injure yourself now, you'll be put off coming back. If you are a novice gardener, it might be worthwhile asking for a half plot; then when you become more experienced and confident, see if you can upgrade to a standard full plot (250 sq mtrs or 300 sq yds).

2

Remove weeds: The 'long term' object is to remove every trace of weeds, including the roots. This might mean a lot of hard work initially but avoid using a rotovator as some weeds, particularly the more persistent (couch grass, docks, nettles, bindweed) will be chopped up and will spread and multiply as a result. It may seem tedious, but regularly hoeing in dry weather is the best way to kill off weeds.

3

Which Tools? Five essential tools are needed: spade, fork, trowel, rake and hoe. It is worthwhile investing in good quality tools, since these can last a lifetime and save you money in the long run. However, it is worthwhile checking out the second-hand shops, car boot sales or internet auction sites, for a bargain.

4

Check your Soil Type— It is important to know your soil type as this will make your time on the plot easier. You should carry out a pH test to ascertain if the soil is alkaline or acid; you can pick up a relatively cheap and simple kit from most garden centres. If your soil is on the acid side apply garden lime before planting out brassicas, since these prefer the soil slightly alkaline.

The test will also provide you with the levels of important nutrients required, potash, phosphate. If low, increase by adding plenty of organic matter, or by using balanced fertilisers, which includes nitrogen. If high, add nitrogen only which is lost quickly from the soil. Test the soil every 3-4 years.

Whatever your soil type, it's worth forking in plenty of garden compost, well-rotted manure or other bulky organic matter to improve the fertility, texture and its ability to retain moisture during the dry season.

5

Which Crops? Grow crops which you, your family and friends enjoy eating before getting too adventurous. Crops to begin with are early potatoes, peas, runner and French beans, salads, onions, beetroot, courgettes, broccoli, cabbage, pumpkins and squashes.

6 Crop Rotation— If you want to keep crops growing well for years to come and avoid a build up soil-borne diseases, it's worth adopting a simple crop rotation system. A four section yearly rotation is best, there are no set rules on how you should divide your plot - it will depend on what you like to eat and what you can grow.

A simple plan is as follows:

1. Potatoes
2. Peas/beans
3. Brassicas (broccoli, cabbage)
4. Onions/roots (carrots, parsnips)

Anything which doesn't fit into these groups might be fitted into any area. Keep a note of what you have planted and where, as labels don't always stay put in windy weather! This might also help you with planning for the following year. The following year, rotate the groups either way - however, always move them in the same direction

7 Start a compost bin— Save money and make a simple wooden frame for potato peelings, fallen leaves, pruning and grass clippings, these will rot down to make excellent homemade compost. You may find it useful to have two—one for older compost that's ready to use and one to fill with new material.

8 Sow seeds—It's important to sow seeds at the right time: April/May is better for seeds sown in the open. Before that, the ground may be too cold and wet. Only hardy seeds should be sown outdoors. The less hardy need protection and should be sown under glass in a sheltered spot or greenhouse. Check the packet. Plants grown in a greenhouse or frame need to be gradually acclimatised to cooler outdoor conditions before being planted out.

9 Planting Seedlings— Seedlings should be planted into a moist soil and lightly watered in. Once established, wetting the surface with a light watering will only encourage a lazy root system. You can protect new plants with bottle cloches (2 litre pop bottles can be cut to suit). Raise plants in pots, then plant out sturdy plants and also grow varieties which have resistance to disease. If you have a shed, a good idea is to harvest the rainwater, but don't use it on your seedlings as it may contain algae.

10 Enjoy it! — This is the most important one of all. Get to know people on your site, as fellow ploholders can give you lots of advice and encouragement. And remember - It's also a tenant's duty to keep boundary hedges cut and trimmed and their plot free from weeds, so make sure you do your bit! If you need any further advice, please contact Head Office and we will be more than willing to help.



National Society of
Allotment & Leisure
Gardeners Limited

PROTECT PROMOTE PRESERVE

O'Dell House, Hunters Road, Corby, Northants NN17 5JE

T: 01536 266576 F: 01536 264509

E:natsoc@nsalg.org.uk W:www.nsalg.org.uk

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