

First Steps to Allotment Gardening

Allotment gardening is no longer a hobby of past-times – with the opportunity to grow fresh, healthy food in abundance, knowing exactly how it has been grown and where it has come from, it is an increasingly popular modern recreation. And quite rightly so!

It offers health benefits, social benefits and environment benefits – and more importantly it helps to retain a ‘little bit of green’ for future generations to enjoy
Go on – you’ll love it!

Obtaining a Plot

Most allotments are run by your local council therefore firstly you should contact them for a list of sites within your area and to obtain details of availability or waiting lists, rent, etc. Some sites are privately owned and administered and your local library may be able to assist you in their location, although sometimes the best way to locate them is by speaking to local businesses, neighbours, to point you in their direction.

Rent levels vary from county to county and can range from £1 to £70, however the national average is approximately £25. The amount of rent charged usually depends on what facilities are available i.e. water/water butts; car-parking; security fencing. Visit several suitable sites and speak to people on the site to ascertain if they have any problems with vandalism, trespassers, etc. If the site is well-tenanted and appears lively then this can be a good sign.

Many sites have formed active associations which offer their members a trading hut, members hut, hold regular meetings, allotment competitions, fund-raising events, etc. and therefore is an excellent way to meet new people and be part of your local community.

If you have problems digging or your ground is on a slope, consider making raised beds.

What Tools?

It is essential that you have a spade, fork, hoe - and don't forget your watering can. It is also useful to have a fork and hand trowel.

It is worthwhile investing in good quality tools as these can last a lifetime and save you money in the long run. However if you don't want to invest too much at the beginning it is worthwhile checking out the second-hand shops or car boot sales for a bargain.

Check your tenancy agreement to see if you are allowed to have a shed as this can save you a lot of time and effort transporting your tools back and forth.



What Crops?

Grow crops which you, your family and friends enjoy eating before getting too adventurous. Crops to begin with are early potatoes, peas, salads, onions, beetroot. Also try beans, broccoli, cabbage, and for fun pumpkins and squashes.

Check your Soil Type

It is important to know your soil type as this will make your time on the plot easier therefore you should carry out a pH test to ascertain if the soil is alkaline or acid. If your soil is on the acid side apply garden lime before planting out brassicas as they prefer the soil slightly alkaline.

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

With sandy soil it is much easier to clear weeds as it is easier to work with, however it requires considerable organic matter and therefore may take a while to improve.

Clay soil holds water and nutrients well but may take a bit of work to get it into a condition which is easier to work with.

Crop Rotation

By adopting a rotation system you will help prevent soil-borne diseases building up as you are not growing the same crop on the same piece of ground each year. It also helps to make best use of the nutrients in the soil.

A four year rotation is advised however 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
4. Onions/roots

Anything that doesn't fit into these groups can be fitted into any area.

The next year, rotate the groups either way - however always move them in the same direction

Tips

-  Protect new plants with bottle cloches (2 litre pop bottles can be cut to suit)
-  Raise plants in pots then plant out sturdy plants
-  Grow varieties which have resistance to disease
-  Keep a note of what you have planted and where as labels don't always stay put in windy weather!
-  This can also help you with planning for the following year
-  Hoeing in dry weather ensures the weeds will die
-  Start a compost bin immediately and recycle as much organic matter as possible
-  Use a water butt to collect rain water off the shed
-  Grow annual and perennial flowers as these attract pest-eating insects and are important if you are organic gardening—they also look good in a vase!



Important

It is a tenant's duty under the Allotment Acts that the plot remains in a good state of cultivation and free of weeds and to keep your boundary hedges cut and trimmed.

Check the conditions of your tenancy agreement - you may be required to obtain permission before erecting any shed/greenhouse, if you wish to mulch with old carpets, light bonfires, etc.