



GUIDE TO NEW GARDENERS

Introduction

Allotment gardening is a wonderful activity, combining gentle exercise - outdoors in the fresh air - with the immense satisfaction that comes from growing vegetables and fruit from seeds and seedlings to maturity. It really is an unique community based activity, where you can form close friendships and bonds based on a common love of growing your own vegetables. Most of all perhaps is the satisfaction you get from producing all that fresh, healthy and wholesome food for your family and friends. Until you experience what it's like to harvest crops and prepare them (totally fresh) from the allotment you'll never realise what we are forced to accept as "fresh" from the supermarkets. There really is no comparison, and best of all YOU know what you're eating, without the hormones, pesticides and other harmful chemicals - that you may not be aware of - that the shop-bought alternatives have been exposed to. It's also a peaceful hobby that relaxes you from the stresses of modern living. The allotment can be a haven to retreat to from the hustle and bustle of our fast modern lives, it really is the best stress therapy possible.

This guide will help you, particularly during that difficult first year on your allotment when there seems to be so much to do and learn and so little time to do it in.

Gardening is, of course, a constant study and you'll soon move from the basic advice provided here to becoming an unique expert yourself. Contrary to popular myth, (especially amongst non-gardeners) you don't need to be an "Ancient of Days" to be wise enough to know exactly what you're doing, or to be highly successful at producing your own crops!

But that's one of the strengths of allotments - they are a community, and there's always someone who can provide you with advice. This Allotment Association web-site, along with many others, can offer good advice and guidance to the beginner. Many of these are also a good source for research and answers to problems. Most of all, allotment gardening is a pleasure. Whether you choose to compete in one of the many horticultural competitions across the county or prefer

simply the enjoyment of being out of doors, almost in the countryside, yet just a step away from home, it is a time of relaxation and creativity.

GOOD GARDENING.

Tips for Good Gardening

You'll find this guide is packed with good advice about allotment gardening, from digging the plot to planning year-round use. Adopt the good practices set out here and you should find the experience of managing a plot both enjoyable and rewarding.

This guide isn't a comprehensive manual, and can't answer all your gardening queries. But there's plenty of help available: Libraries and book shops have a great selection of gardening books; the internet is host to gardening clubs, allotment societies and commercial information; local gardening societies provide advice and your fellow plot-holders will often be able to help.

- **Don't rush** – if you try to do too much too quickly, your tasks will become burdens. Instead, do a little and often. See *Preparing the Plot* for some ideas on getting your allotment into shape.
- **Plant wisely** – don't be tempted to rush out on the first sunny day, and look for the varieties that grow well in your area. See *What to Grow* for some advice on selecting suitable varieties for your soil, and *How Much Time* to get an idea of what time you'll need to put aside throughout the year.
- **Protect the soil** – if you take care of your soil, you'll have less watering, weeding and digging to do. If you prepare the soil as recommended, the *Mulching* guide will help you keep it in top form.
- **Make compost** – what starts off as waste soon becomes an asset, improving soil, feeding your plants and reducing rubbish. See *Composting* for a guide on how to build and maintain a compost pile.
- **Rotate your crops** – the three trials to a gardener are the weather, pests and diseases. There's not a lot you can do about the weather, but crop rotation will limit the damage caused by soil-borne pests and diseases. See *Crop Rotation* for guidance.
- **Use the plot year-round** - you'll have a better selection of food for longer, and it will be easier to keep on top of things. See *Year-Round Gardening* for some advice on what to plant.
- **Be a good neighbour** – consider your fellow gardeners and neighbours as well as thinking of what to grow and how to grow it.

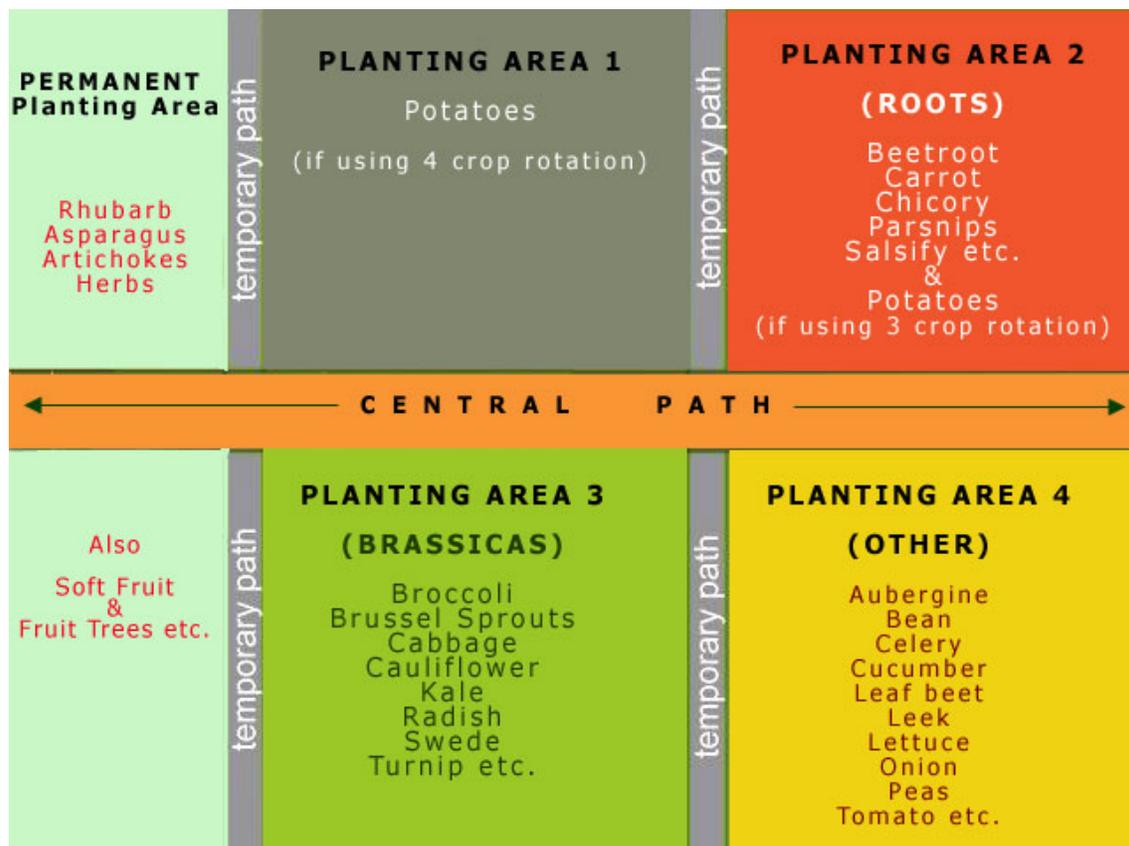
- **Enjoy it** – allotment gardening is a delightful, social activity that brings an understanding of nature and an abundance of fruit and vegetables with a freshness and flavour unrivalled in the shops. Regard it as a delight and a privilege to have an allotment, not a chore!

Preparing the Plot

Good preparation will make all your tasks easier, and this is particularly true when it comes to laying out the plot and preparing the soil. After all, two key objectives are to make life easy for yourself and the soil good for your plants.

You might take over a plot that requires no work, having been left perfect by the departing tenant. More likely, it will be covered in couch grass and other perennial weeds! This isn't so bad, as a blank canvas allows you to decide how the plot is laid out and the couch grass will hold your paths together no matter how much use they get.

The first thing to do is to make a plan of the plot, including in the design those features that you want. It's handy to have four similarly-sized areas to help plan crop rotation, plus areas for permanent plantings of trees, soft fruit and vegetables such as asparagus and artichokes.



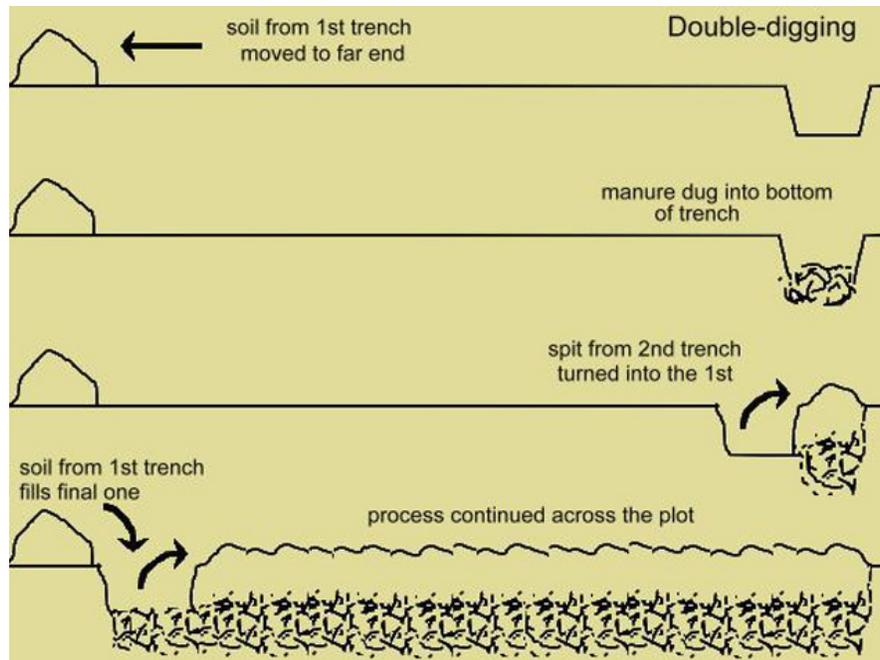
You'll need paths 500mm (18") wide, a compost area of at least 2x1m (2x1 yards) for a minimum of two compost bins, a shed (for storing tools, possibly fertiliser and storing harvested crops) and possibly a greenhouse/ polytunnel or cold frame.



You want to avoid walking on beds whenever possible (which greatly reduces the amount of digging required later on), so have sufficient paths to allow you to reach the middle of each bed without stepping on it - perhaps 1.5m (5') between the paths. You could include a pond or a rough area that will be left uncultivated, and this will encourage pollinators and pest controllers (e.g. ladybirds, frogs, slow worms, hedgehogs etc) onto your plot.

Start the work by cutting back any vegetation as close to the ground as you can (a strimmer will be useful), mark out the areas for beds, paths, compost bins and other features with pegs and string, roughen up the soil where the compost heap will be made, and get digging the beds - but don't loosen the soil where the shed, greenhouse or paths will be.

Double digging is what nearly all the books recommend. It takes longer, but done properly it might be the last time you use a spade other than to lift crops! The purpose is to loosen the subsoil for improved drainage and easier root penetration, without mixing it with the humus-rich top-soil.



Starting at one end of the bed, dig out a trench of soil the depth and width of the spade, and pile up the soil just beyond the far end of the bed, removing weeds and piling them on the compost heap (be careful with perennial weed roots, as they may grow again when the compost is used). Always remove as much soil as you can from the roots of weeds, as this will speed up composting. Use a fork to loosen the soil at the base of the trench thoroughly. If this is very heavy clay, you might want to work in some gypsum or woodchip to help open it up for good drainage. Dig a second trench right up against the first, weeding and moving the top layer of soil onto the loosened soil in the first trench, and again loosen the sub-soil below. Work across the bed repeating this process, until you get to the far end. Here, you can rake the soil you removed from the first trench into the final trench. Following this procedure ensures that you have the least amount of carrying to do, leaving your strength to get on with digging the next bed!

The surface of the bed will probably have been lifted up by around 20cm (8") and the soil will be very soft, ideal for most plants. Don't walk on it or it will compress back to what you started with; this is why you have more paths than you think you need. Stone slabs are useful as the base for a shed or greenhouse (and will prolong the life of wooden structures), and old rafters or scaffolding planks will help define the paths (you can often salvage wood from skips, but ask the owner first!).

Wooden pallets make excellent sides for compost bins, an old bath will make a good-sized pond for tadpoles. Properly used, there is much that can be given a new life and purpose on allotments, without looking unsightly. Most plants prefer a neutral soil, and an overly acid or alkaline soil will not release nutrients to your plants. If you are able, test the soil acidity (pH meters are quite inexpensive, and

you may be able to borrow one). If the soil is too alkaline (7.5 or above on the pH scale), an application of ammonium sulphate at 100g (4oz) per square metre (yard) will help bring the soil back into balance. Most likely, the soil will be too acid (6 or lower on the pH scale) and this can be corrected by an application of ground lime at 450g (16oz) per square metre (yard). When using either of these chemicals, avoid using any other chemicals or manure, or sowing any seeds for at least two weeks. Two or three weeks before planting, add a general fertilizer to the soil. Blood, Fish and Bone is a good general purpose NPK slow-release fertilizer. (NPK refers to the three primary nutrients used by plants: nitrogen (N) promotes leaf growth, phosphorus (P) promotes root development and potassium (K) promotes flower and seed production.) As a general guide, a top dressing of 50g (2oz) per square metre (yard) is about right, but dig in a base dressing of 100g (4oz) if you are using woodchip as a mulch, to avoid any nitrogen deficiency. Remember that too much is just as bad for plants as too little, so don't overdo it. Digging over a plot will expose many weed seeds, and these will start growing immediately, whatever the season. Whilst a good mulch will stifle many weeds, many more will get through. Don't worry, as they will be easy to pull out if you have dug the soil properly. Be sure to tackle them, by hand or with a hoe, before planting seeds.

What to Grow

Pretty well all of the vegetable and herb seeds you find in garden centres can be grown in Aberaeron's mild climate, though those that call for a greenhouse will probably require one, at least until June. The best practice is to follow the instructions on the packet, which will be fine (even cautious) for this area.

Plants bought from the garden centre in spring will often have been given favourable treatment to bring them on, so acclimatise these before planting out. Soil varies across Ceredigion: some is heavy clay, some a clay and gravel mix, some almost pure gravel and some is rather sandy. Much of the land covered by allotments has been greatly improved by years of gardening, though you will still find the basic soil lying not far beneath the surface. Some vegetable and fruit varieties will do better on one type of soil or another and, within these varieties, some plants will be more successful than others. Learn about your soil (that sounds obvious, but it will take you the full range of seasons to fully understand it) and adapt your planting to suit. If there isn't a variety of carrot that will stand your heavy clay, either forget carrots and plant beetroot instead, or build a raised bed filled with lighter soil. Experience will tell you what grows well on your plot, and you can learn from what others grow on the site. Sensitive plants such as aubergines, peppers and cucumbers can be grown in pots, starting their life in a greenhouse or polytunnel and being moved outside in warmer weather. They're easy to grow, even in poor years. You can grow many different soft and top fruits, though some delicate fruits may require a southerly aspect with wind protection. It is best to buy fruit canes, bushes and trees from a reputable dealer who can guarantee virus-free stock.

An allotment is not just about vegetables and fruit; plenty of gardeners grow flowers, too. Flowers can help increase your overall yield by improving pollination, and will give you and your neighbours great pleasure. Whatever you choose to grow, don't be put off by a crop failure - this happens to us all from time to time, and the reasons are often beyond our control. Whatever the cause, it is not a cause for embarrassment!

How Much Time?

Many gardeners fail to appreciate the amount of time required to keep an allotment in good shape. Starting late in spring with all the basic work (soil preparation, weeding etc.) to do and all the crops to sow, they have difficulty in keeping up. The best idea is to start preparing the plot for the coming year in autumn, doing a little digging each weekend (perhaps an hour or so) so that the plot is ready for planting in spring. Of course, if you've just taken on an overgrown plot you may need to put twice that time in just to get it ready in time for the early crops. There will be a few crops to plant in February and March, but the bulk of the planting takes place in April and May. You'll gradually increase the amount of time spent on the plot and, by the time summer comes, you may be spending 15 hours a week watering, weeding and tending your plants. Most gardeners will put in a lot of this time at weekends, but the best advice is to spare a couple of hours each morning or evening – then you'll spot any problems that much earlier and these are better times to water (and easier times to work) than at the height of the day. If you plan and plant a year-round allotment, you'll find it easier to keep on top of maintenance and any digging and winter weeding that is required, simply because you're visiting the plot regularly. An hour spent rooting out perennial weeds in autumn can save a day getting to grips with the same weeds in spring. The advice here will help reduce the amount of work required, but the best advice is to make your visits to the allotment a pleasure rather than a chore – then the time will fly by!

Going Organic

Should you, or shouldn't you, garden organically? The reasons why people garden organically are varied. For some it is an ethical consideration – should we risk the potential damage to the environment? For others, the debate centres on health – are the chemicals approved for garden use actually dangerous to us? For many gardeners, it is simply a matter of preferring to work with that which nature has provided. In general, gardening organically is no easier or more difficult than modern gardening with chemicals. Crop yields are similar, taste is substantially the same, and there are costs associated with either method. Organic gardeners spend money on barriers and traps, non-organic gardeners spend money on fertilizers, pesticides and fungicides. When it comes to gardening as a pleasure, though, organic methods win hands-down. Spraying a crop for aphids is just a chore, whilst growing comfrey and nettles to encourage

ladybirds – which eat aphids by the score every day – is something you can enjoy. Creating a winter home out of leaves and twigs for hedgehogs will give you pleasure, and the hedgehogs will return the favour by scoffing slugs. Surely that's more fun than sprinkling slug pellets?

The same is true of feeding your plants. It gives satisfaction to see beautiful, crumbly, sweet smelling compost made from the waste of your plot. You can't say that of a packet of powder. Organic gardening is certainly the fuller and more pleasurable experience, and has the benefit of being tried and tested over thousands of years.

Mulching

In its natural state our soil is held together by roots, protected from the elements by a canopy of grasses, shrubs and trees, and additional winter protection is provided by the fall of leaves and other plant "waste". This is not so on allotments, where the continuous cycle of planting, harvesting and resting depletes the soil and frequently leaves the surface bare. And soil does not like to be bare: Wind dries it, forming a thin surface crust through which seedlings have difficulty penetrating. The heavy clay soil is prone to pancaking, particularly on well-prepared beds. Heavy rain washes much of the goodness out of the soil, and in extreme cases actually washes the soil away. Locally, the rain turns clay into an unyielding, gooey mess that cannot be worked during winter. Walking on the soil compacts it, squeezing out the pockets of air that feed the organisms that in turn keep all our plants alive. Severe compaction prevents drainage, and the resultant water-logging can damage root systems and stop plants growing altogether. Sunshine quickly evaporates moisture near the surface, adding to plant stress in the summer. A good surface mulch addresses each of these problems. It prevents the wind drying the surface, it protects the surface from heavy rain, it traps moisture without preventing the sun warming the soil, and a good thick layer can greatly reduce soil compaction by spreading the weight of gardeners' footsteps. It also suppresses annual weeds. In these conditions your plants will be healthier and more resistant to disease and insect attack. And you will have less digging, watering and weeding to do. Many materials, natural and manufactured, can be used as mulches. For a simple surface cover that will protect the soil from wind, sun and rain and suppress weeds, use old wool carpet (but not rubber-backed) or one of the many woven polypropylene products available from garden centres. The advantage of this sort of cover is that it can be laid quickly and moved about as required, so it is ideal when you've taken on an overgrown plot or don't have the time to keep up with tasks. It allows water to penetrate, keeping the soil moist and viable.

These materials can also be used semi-permanently: simply cut a cross in the material and put the plant you wish to grow through the cut into the soil. The plant will grow and the weeds won't. Eventually the cuts will render the covering useless, but this can take years. A mulch of straw will

provide protection against wind, rain and compaction and, gathered around winter crops, will also afford some frost protection. It is easy to lay and easy to move when you need to clear an area for planting, and it lasts a long time as it is not readily taken into the soil. It is inexpensive but transport can be a problem, particularly if you want to cover an entire plot.

Leaves make a good mulch, but those from the plants you grow can carry disease over to the following season, so on the allotment they are better added to the compost bin.

Woodchip is an excellent material that can be laid thickly all over the plot. It provides all the benefits of soil protection allied to fairly rapid decomposition and the resultant improvement to the soil. It has two further advantages: it can be delivered free in most areas, and using it means that it doesn't have to be transported to landfill or to a commercial composting operation. It is perfectly feasible to put a layer 20cm (8") thick all over the plot, and much of this will decompose over the year and improve the soil lying beneath. You can even use it on your paths. If you use woodchip extensively, it is worth putting an additional top dressing of general purpose fertiliser (such as blood, fish and bone) to replace the nitrogen that will be used to break down the wood in the soil. You should watch out for conifers, which have a growth-inhibiting hormone that will prevent seeds germinating (but won't affect seedlings) and also privet cuttings, which prevent most things from growing. Otherwise, most materials are fine.

Living mulches are crops grown primarily to protect the soil. They provide a protective canopy as they grow, and feed the soil when they are dug in at the end of their life. There are fast-growing crops (such as mustard) that can be grown in spring on land that won't be planted until summer.

There are deep-rooted crops (such as alfalfa) that will take nutrients from the underlying clay soil and make them available to the next crop to be planted.

Vetches absorb nitrogen from the atmosphere, enriching soil after growing a heavy feeder such as potatoes.

There are over-wintering crops (such as grazing rye) that are sown in autumn and protect the soil from the worst of the weather.

Special formulations, such as Tübingen Mix, incorporate a variety of flowers designed to attract butterflies, bees and other pollinators during spring and summer to increase yields from nearby food crops. With all living mulches, the trick is to turn them into the soil just before they go to seed (unless you want to continue growing the same mulch on the same patch in future!).

Composting

Compost is an excellent soil conditioner and plant food. It regulates the supply of moisture to plants and reduces the need for watering, encourages the activity of worms which keep the soil aerated, and provides all the basic nutrients and trace elements to promote plant growth and health. Healthy plants don't require applications of pesticides and fungicides, which will please wildlife, and without wildlife you'd be surprised how difficult allotment gardening would become!

Composting vegetable waste not only makes a nutrient-rich soil conditioner, it also takes up to 30% of household waste away from landfill sites, which might not have a great effect on your council tax bill but certainly helps the environment. With proper care, a small composting area can produce a good quantity of high quality compost every year. To achieve this, though, the compost pile requires the same care and attention as the plants themselves.

Compost is produced by the action of bacteria living off decaying plant remains. (Worms, woodlice and others also play their part, but it is the bacteria that are the main agents.) The ideal conditions are warm, damp, loose and airy: not dry or sodden, and not packed tight. Given these conditions, the bacteria can work fast (and generate a lot of heat, which kills off weed seeds) and you could have good compost in three to four months. You can achieve this by providing a good bin, the right mix of materials and the right conditions.

You don't actually need a compost bin to make compost, but they help keep the plot tidy and are useful when you come to turn the pile. There are some inexpensive plastic bins, but they usually don't last long. Many local authorities provide sturdy bins made from recycled plastic which, though not large, are heavily subsidised and it is churlish to refuse one.

Wooden bins hold a lot more, and offer better insulation and ventilation. They're expensive to buy, but you can make one from four abandoned pallets - for best results, stand them with the wooden face of each pallet facing inwards, staple chicken wire to the outside of each and pack straw behind the wire to help insulate the pile.

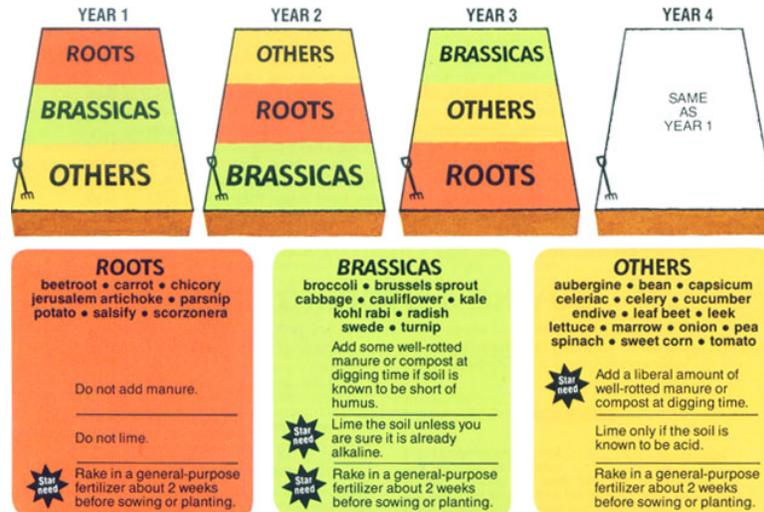
Tumbler bins are convenient because they enable you to turn the compost without digging it out and repacking it, but they are expensive and hold only a small amount of material. You can make a large, inexpensive bin from four posts and chicken wire, but you'll probably have to replace the wire every year or two. (Wormeries are a very effective way of dealing with kitchen waste, but are less suitable for allotments and are beyond the scope of this guide.) You can put any vegetable matter (including paper and cardboard) in a compost bin and, in time, it will rot down. To get good compost quickly, you need to ensure that there is a roughly equal mix of woody and soft, green material. Too much woody material and very little will happen, as the compost pile will be too dry and lacking in nitrogen-rich material to help the bacteria. Too much green material may lead to

anaerobic activity and an unpleasant smell. Just add what you have as it becomes available.

If you produce a lot of green waste from the kitchen and have lots of weeds, balance this with a similar quantity of woodchip. If you have a lot of twigs, chop them into small pieces (a shredder is a great help, but somewhat costly) so they're more easily mixed in. Soil is not a problem in the compost pile, but you should remove whatever soil you can from the roots of weeds, otherwise they may continue growing – in an ideal situation! **Don't add meat or dairy products, as these can produce some unpleasant toxins and will attract flies and foxes.** The pile needs careful maintenance for good composting. It should be moist to the touch, but not so damp that you can squeeze water out of it. You can usually detect a pile that is too wet by the unpleasant smell that comes from it, and add some woodchip or cardboard to absorb some of the moisture. If it is too dry, water the pile with a can and sprinkler. Bacteria need air, and this only penetrates a few inches into a pile, so it will need frequent aeration. The best way is to turn the entire pile over as soon as the heat starts to go (perhaps every fortnight or so in summer). If the pile isn't heating up, try mixing the materials and checking the balance of soft and woody material. (It will compost anyway, but will be much more slowly.) Once the material has lost its original identity and is becoming a uniform texture and colour, the work is nearly done. Stop adding material now, and start a new pile. Soon you will be able to use the decomposed material as a soil conditioner, or you could sieve it and use the large material as a surface mulch and the finer material for potting.

Crop Rotation

Crop rotation is the practice of planting crops in different locations each year. There are two good reasons for doing this: Each crop makes particular demands of the soil in which it is grown, and growing the same crop in the same place year after year soon depletes the soil of the goodness required by the crop. The second reason is that over the course of a season diseases associated with a particular crop build up in the soil, and that planting the same crop into soil which already has a build-up of disease will weaken and possibly destroy the crop. Most diseases will disappear over the course of a year or two if their favourite plant isn't available, but some can live on for 7 or 8 years. The ideal crop rotation plan ensures that a crop doesn't return to a bed for eight years, but this requires a lot of beds and careful record-keeping, and lack of space dictates that most gardeners will opt for a 3 or 4 year cycle.



This will prevent most problems, but if a disease like club root takes hold you won't be able to grow brassicas in that soil for at least 7 years. The sequence in which different crops are planted in a particular bed is determined principally by each plant's nitrogen requirement. Some require a lot of nitrogen, some a little, some actually collect nitrogen from the air and so enrich the soil. The normal cycle is to feed the soil (with manure, compost, etc.), then grow the heavy feeders, then grow the nitrogen fixers, then the light feeders, then back to feeding the soil for the next heavy feeders.

Cover crops such as vetches can be incorporated into the cycle; this helps to balance the preponderance of heavy feeders in most gardening plans. For the purpose of planning crop rotation, plants are grouped by family (because they make similar demands and have similar susceptibilities). Here are some examples of frequently grown crops, by plant family (heavy nitrogen feeders are identified HF, light feeders LF, and nitrogen fixers NF):

- alliaceae (LF); garlic, leek, onion, shallot
- compositae (HF); chicory, endive, lettuce
- chenopodiaceae (HF); beetroot, chard, spinach
- cruciferae (HF); broccoli, brussels sprout, cabbage, cauliflower, swede, turnip
- cucurbitaceae (HF); courgette, cucumber, marrow, pumpkin
- gramineae (HF); sweetcorn
- leguminosae (NF); broad bean, french bean, runner bean, pea
- solanaceae (HF); aubergine, capsicum, potato, tomato
- umbelliferae (LF); carrot, celery, dill, parsnip

A typical example might be to grow potatoes (heavy feeders) or newly fertilized soil, to follow these in the next season with peas and beans (which feed the soil), and follow these with onions (light feeders). In the fourth season, rather than planting potatoes again (which would give only a three year cycle), a different heavy feeder from a different family might be grown (eg. courgettes).

Designing a crop rotation plan requires careful consideration. Most of us grow more plants from the heavy feeders category than the others, so the Feed - HF - NF - LF - Feed cycle is not easy to maintain.

Similarly, a four or eight year cycle demands consideration about where different crops can be grown. It isn't simply a matter of saying that a particular crop can't go into the soil until the end of the cycle - it's the whole family. Matters are further complicated by having to deal with the specific requirements of many of our favourite crops. Potatoes frequently contract scab if grown on a limed soil, so they can't follow on from brassicas, which love lime.

Carrots and parsnips hate rich soils, so they can't be planted in an area that has been recently manured. They also like a well-drained, stone-free soil, so they may be limited to a few specific areas of the plot anyway. If you intend to use companion planting (growing different plants together because they afford one another protection from pests), then two or more families may be grown together and neither should return to that bed within the crop rotation cycle. Don't let this dissuade you from producing a plan that at least meets some of the criteria.

We're in the business of lessening the effect of pests and diseases, and even the best plans will fail from time to time. The best bit of advice is to remember to write down what you've grown where, and keep these records for the future.

Year-Round Gardening

For some gardeners, the year starts at Easter and ends when the clocks go back in October. But this probably requires more time and effort than gardening year-round, and certainly is much less rewarding.

Think of all the things you miss out on: nutty, crunchy sprouts; sweet-tasting parsnips; creamy cauliflowers, pungent leeks; fresh sprouting broccoli; winter salads. And it's not just the winter crops - start late in the year and you'll miss the opportunity of growing spring crops and early varieties of summer produce - a treat when they're still expensive in the shops.

With all these good things to grow, how could anyone ignore their allotment during the winter! But good food year-round is not the only reason for continuing to visit the plot in the winter months. Nature doesn't take a break in winter - weeds continue to grow, and materials decay. By keeping on top of tasks, you'll

reduce the amount of maintenance required and avoid the backlog in spring – the time when gardeners are busiest. The soil will benefit for your activity, too, and so will the wildlife. You'll need to organise the plot for year-round use. There are three things to consider:

- firstly, when does each variety need to be planted;
- secondly, how long will it occupy the bed; and
- thirdly, the crop rotation plan, which should include cover crops to regenerate the soil.

The instructions on seed packets will give you a good idea of when to plant a variety and how long the soil will be occupied, and you'll find that a simple plan of each of the seasons will soon show what space you have for early and late crops.

Remember the basics of crop rotation, and that the soil will require feeding after growing a greedy crop such as tomatoes or potatoes. You can add compost if you're looking to use the area again quickly, or you could grow a cover crop (there are winter crops as well as summer) for longer-term regeneration which will provide protection for the soil whilst the crop is growing and will add humus and food to the soil for the next crop.

A cover crop also provides shelter for spiders, beetles and other beneficial insects. Perhaps the most important aspect of planning for the year-round allotment, though, is to look for more interesting, less run-of-the-mill varieties to grow. One of the greatest delights of the allotments is that the variety of seeds available to you greatly outstrips anything available in supermarkets and greengrocers.

To take just one example, there are at least 400 varieties of tomato you can grow, from off-white to near-black, early, mid and late season croppers, for cooking, bottling, drying, salads, sauces and more. You'll find a certain amount of seed swapping going on at the allotments, and there are now many specialist seed clubs that are able to supply unusual and distinct species and varieties for you to try.

Good Neighbours

These aren't the rules for allotments; they are simply examples of being a good neighbour. Follow them and you'll find that you'll get along with people and the allotments will be a more pleasant environment. But take care to observe the rules of your tenancy, too, or your plot may be at risk.

Rubbish - there is no automatic right to rubbish clearance on allotments and all dumping – whether vegetable waste or any other material - is selfish. You may be fined and could lose your plot if you dump rubbish. From time to time there may be an opportunity to have rubbish cleared from the site - when this happens, be prepared to lend a hand.

Bonfires - there are no set times when bonfires are or are not allowed. This is a matter of commonsense. Let material dry out before burning it, so there'll be less smoke. Don't light a bonfire on a sunny day when neighbours may have hung washing out to dry. Don't have a bonfire on a windy day, when the smoke may travel far and the fire could get out of control. Never leave a fire unattended.

Paths - the maintenance of paths is your responsibility (that is one of the rules). That means all the paths around your plot, and any communal paths. These should be kept in a fit state to walk upon at all times. Couch grass is planted on allotments because its roots hold the path together under heavy wear - don't destroy the path by using weedkiller on it.

Gates - you have a responsibility towards all other plot-holders to ensure you close (or lock) the gate after you use it. There is little point in having fences if you do not. Think how you'd feel if someone left the gate open and it was your produce that was lost. And if the fence is vandalised, don't leave it to someone else to report the matter to the Association committee.

Advice - advice is often welcome, but you should never press the point, even when it seems obvious to you that someone is getting something wrong. They may not want to achieve the results you look for, and you might even learn from their example.

Cultivation - allotments are provided to be used. If you don't use and take care of your plot, you may lose it. It is unfair to other gardeners (and would-be gardeners) to leave it growing weeds throughout the year. If you have little time to spare, at least plant a cover crop to protect and feed the soil and keep the weeds at bay.

Chemicals - some gardeners choose to use chemicals, some prefer to avoid them. Whilst the choice is yours, you should respect the way others garden. If you want to spray a crop, do so only when there is no wind and make sure you don't send the spray onto a neighbour's plants. Being pressed for time is not an excuse to ruin someone else's gardening experience.

Communal features - It might be a hedgerow, or some hard standing onto which woodchip or manure is delivered. Whatever they are, these communal features help you in your gardening and you have a responsibility towards them. Pruning, tidying, litter-picking, path strimming and the like are the responsibility of every plot-holder - not just those few who always turn out to help.