

## Keeping an Allotment

Keeping an allotment can be a very rewarding pastime. There are many benefits, including physical exercise, mental wellbeing, healthy eating, social interaction and family bonding. But it can also prove hard work and a little demoralising at times if plots are not kept under control.

Keeping an allotment is a commitment.

TV programmes are very good at making it look easy, they usually show loose easily-dug soil in their demonstrations. However, if you've just been allocated an allotment the chances are you've inherited a disused plot which will require a lot of hard work to clear well-established weeds and to break the ground. If this is the case, it's important to establish control of your plot as quickly as you can and there's no shame in seeking help from family and friends to assist with this initial challenge.

Whilst it's not always possible to allocate a lot of your time to your allotment garden, gaining control of your plot quickly will pay dividends in the long run. However, be careful not to fall into the trap that so many new allotmenters fall into. Having worked so hard to clear your plot, resist the temptation to take a break and leave it a few weeks before returning. Those that do, invariably return to a weed-infested plot and find themselves back at square one. After the initial purge, "little and often" is the key to enjoyable and successful allotment gardening.

Essential equipment is a good spade, fork, hoe and rake. The purchase or loan of a garden Rotovator may prove a great help.

If you haven't inherited a shed you may want to acquire one, and if you do, the addition of some guttering and a water butt could prove very useful.

Many experienced gardeners will argue strenuously that no allotment is complete without a compost bin or heap of some kind. Not only do they give you somewhere to dispose of your weeds, they provide valuable compost free of charge. Some traditionalists say you should always have two compost bins, one to dump the current seasons' waste and another to draw compost from the previous seasons' waste. There are several "tricks of the trade" to help produce good quality compost, including covering, watering and turning the heap. Don't forget worms are very beneficial and will help produce good quality compost. Avoid putting perennial weeds on the heap as they will usually survive and re-grow. Perennial weeds and their roots should be burned or disposed of through other means.

When choosing and planting your crops, consider the size of the mature specimen and pay particular attention to the planting distances recommended on the seed packets, leaflets and guides. It's very common for new enthusiastic gardeners to plant too closely together and thus deny the crops the space they need to develop properly. Over-crowding also encourages pests and diseases.

Don't plant the same crop on the same piece of ground year after year. Rotation of crops is an important aspect of allotment management.

Another pitfall to be aware of is the incorrect sowing of seeds. A common mistake with inexperienced gardeners is to sow seeds too deeply – effectively burying them rather than sowing them and hence they fail to germinate, much to the dismay of the gardener. Again, follow the advice on the seed packets. As a golden rule, the smaller the seed the closer to the surface it needs to be.

Finally, make sure you've got a seat of some kind. Sit back and take the weight off your feet, survey your kingdom, bask in the fruits of your labour, listen to the birds singing, breathe in the fresh air, feel the sun on your skin and experience a wonderful sense of well-being.

Keeping an allotment can be the most rewarding experience. Enjoy!