

ALLOTMENT GARDENING

Where to start



Where you start will depend on the condition of the plot when you take it over.

If you have just taken over a plot that has been kept beautifully by the previous holder then your task will be an easy one. Just decide what you want to plant and get growing.

It is much more likely that your new plot will be covered in a variety of weeds as well as a selection of bits and pieces left over from the previous tenant. Look on this as an opportunity to get the plot set up in the way that you prefer from the start.

First things first

Take a look around the plot and decide whether you can use any of the structures, wood or netting etc that may have been left by the previous tenant. Anything else is rubbish and you can arrange for its disposal.

Make a plan

Take the time to decide where you want to put your paths, sheds, composting area and beds. It is good to have a clear aim in mind before you start.

Think about crop rotation

Rotational Plan of rectangular area as detailed below:

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Bed 1	Potatoes family & compatible plants followed by lime	Legumes (Peas/ Beans) followed by additional lime	Brassicas family & compatible plants	Onion family & compatible plants followed by manure
Bed 2	Legumes (Peas/ Beans) followed by additional lime	Brassicas family & compatible plants	Onion family & compatible plants followed by manure	Potatoes family & compatible plants followed by lime
Bed 3	Brassicas family & compatible plants	Onion family & compatible plants followed by manure	Potatoes family & compatible plants followed by lime	Legumes (Peas & Beans) followed by additional lime
Bed 4	Onion family & compatible plants followed by manure	Potatoes family & compatible plants followed by lime	Legumes (Peas & Beans) followed by additional lime	Brassicas family & compatible plants

The group names for each course are:

- The potato family & compatible plants
- Legumes (members of the pea and bean family) & compatible plants
- The brassica family (members of the cabbage family) & compatible plants
- The onion family & roots

Weeds



The basics

A weed can be defined as any plant that is growing in the wrong place.

Most weeds can be defined as annual or perennial.

Annual weeds germinate from seed in the soil. They grow quickly and will flower, set seed and die within a single season. They usually have shallow roots and are relatively easy to remove. Examples of an Annual weeds are Chickweed and Annual Meadow Grass.

Perennial weeds can germinate from seeds in the soil but they can also spread over larger areas by runner or root growth. They will grow and set seed over the course of a single season but unless the root is removed each plant will return again stronger the following year. It can be difficult to get rid of perennial weeds because unless you manage to remove every small piece of their roots they will grow back. Examples of perennial weeds are Couch Grass, Docks and Dandelions.

Weeds compete with your crops for nutrients, water and light so it makes sense to keep your plot as clear of weeds as possible.

Avoiding the problem is better than taking remedial action so every hour spent in preparing your plot will be time well spent.

Remove as many perennial weed roots as you can before you sow or plant any crops.

Prevent weed seeds from germinating by covering any bare ground with a barrier or mulch. Planting crops through a barrier such as black polythene can be effective. Large leafed, fast growing crops such as potatoes are good at outcompeting weeds and the soil disturbance that comes from their cultivation also helps to reduce the need for weeding.

Weed management

Cut back any vegetation as close to the ground as possible. A strimmer / brushcutter is the best tool for the job and if you don't have one of your own you may be able to borrow one from one of your allotment neighbours, (Check with your rep as they are most likely to know who might help) or hire one for the day. Rake off the vegetation and either remove it from the site or compost it.

There are several ways of getting rid of the weeds on your plot and it is up to you which one you decide to use depending on your abilities and preferences.

Pace yourself - Try not to become overwhelmed by the task ahead. The **secret of success is to do a little and often.**

One way of getting rid of weeds is to dig over the entire plot getting rid of weeds and roots as you go. This method is hard work and time consuming and unless you cover the areas that you have dug over as you go, you may find that the weeds start growing again before you get to the end of the job. This is the stage where some new allotment holders get demoralized and give up. If this is the method that you intend to use it is as well that you are aware of the work involved before you begin and consider the alternatives.

Covering the ground with a barrier will stop the weeds from growing but it will also stop you getting anything else planted. You should also be aware that unless you remove the weed roots before you place the cover the weeds are likely to start re-

growing as soon as the cover is removed. This method is excellent for stopping re-growth but it should not be seen as a stand alone method of weed removal.

The fastest way of getting rid of the weeds on your plot is to apply a herbicide treatment e.g. spray with a Glyphosate based weedkiller. Always follow the instructions on the label or better still get an experienced person to do the spraying for you. Once sprayed the plants will continue to grow which draws the herbicide down into the roots. It may take a couple of weeks but this method will kill off all vegetation in one go.

If you do go down the chemical route please be a careful neighbour. Take care to spray only when conditions are such that there is no risk of spray drifting onto other plots and try to inform neighbours of your intentions.

Remove weed seedlings early by hoeing regularly between your crops. It is best to hoe when it is warm and dry as this helps to kill the seedlings.

Cultivation - You may already have dug over the site to get rid of weeds but if not you will have to get the ground turned and broken up before you can get growing. The fastest method is to use a rotovator. As with the strimmer you could check with your rep whether there is one available on site or they can also be hired by the day. **Do not be tempted to rotovate before you remove the perennial weed roots as you will just be making more work for yourself later.** You can of course cultivate using hand tools, this just takes a bit more time and effort.

Irrigation/Water Conservation



Even for those who have access to a water supply, it makes sense to conserve water.

Helpful Tips

Save Rainwater by using a water butt to collect run off from sheds or greenhouses.

Direct water at the roots of plants - where it is needed.

Water thoroughly and infrequently rather than little and often.

Use a rose on your watering can as small droplets are good at penetrating the soil surface. A steady flow of water has a tendency to run off taking your topsoil with it.

Mulch the soil around perennial and woody plants as this will help to stop evaporation from the soil as well as keeping weeds down.

Keep on top of the weeds. Weeds compete with your plants for resources such as moisture.

Get digging. Addition of organic matter such as well rotted manure will help your soil to absorb more moisture and hold onto it for longer.

Good Luck & Happy Gardening