

Allotments: a plotholder's guide



Contents

1. An introduction to allotments
2. Provision
3. Tenancy agreements and rules
4. Rents and funding
5. Health and safety on allotments
6. What you can and can't do on an allotment
7. Livestock and beekeeping
8. Protection and legislation
9. How do I get started?
10. Resources



Glossary

Allotment garden – a piece of land not exceeding 40 poles in extent which is wholly or mainly cultivated by the plotholder for the production of vegetables or fruit by him/herself and family.

Allotment site – collection of allotment plots, sometimes referred to as a 'field'.

Allotment provider – the organisation that rents out the allotment plot to the plotholder.

Allotment authority – a local council with a statutory provision to provide allotments.

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) – government department with responsibility for allotments.

Devolved management – arrangement by which the allotment gardeners manage the allotment site in agreement with the local council. The allotments gardeners usually form an allotment association in order to function in this role.

Lease – legal document signed by an allotment association operating under devolved management.

Plotholder – the person renting an allotment from an allotment provider.

Tenancy agreement – legal document the plotholder signs when renting an allotment.

Organic gardening – gardening method without the use of chemical fertilisers or pesticides, and focusing on increasing the natural health of soil.

1. Introduction to allotments

Allotments provide an excellent opportunity to grow your own fruit and vegetables, meet new people and get plenty of fresh air and exercise. 'Allotments: a plotholder's guide' is for anyone who rents or is thinking of renting an allotment plot. It outlines the basics you need to know in order to enjoy all the opportunities and benefits that allotment gardening offers.

This guidance covers the basics of allotment gardening and allotment law to get you started, and there are a range of organisations that can give you help, advice and support. There are signposts to these organisations throughout this guide. Contact details for all organisations and resources mentioned in the text are listed in Resources.

What is an allotment?

An allotment garden (commonly referred to as an allotment plot) is a piece of land, which can be rented by an individual for growing fruit and vegetables, for personal and family use. Allotments come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The size of allotments available for rent in your area will largely depend on the history of the area and the amount of demand there is for allotments locally.

Land provided as allotments is generally owned by the local authority, but allotment land can also be owned by other landowners, for example, private individuals, charitable trusts, commercial landowners or religious bodies.

Who manages allotments?

There are three main types of organisations involved in the day-to-day leasing and management of allotments that a plotholder may come into contact with:

- Local authority, e.g. town/ borough or parish council
- Private landowner, e.g. charitable trust, private individual(s), commercial company
- Allotment Association or Society, which is made up of the site's plotholders.

For ease of reference, these organisations are collectively referred to as the 'allotment provider'.



The allotment provider will provide the plotholder with a renewable one-year lease (tenancy agreement) and is responsible for the collection of rent, management and maintenance of the site. Your tenancy agreement should tell you who manages your site and whom to contact if you have any queries, suggestions, or complaints.

Government responsibility

The Department for Communities and Local Government is responsible for overall government policy on allotments at a national level. The Department's aim is to promote allotments, provide necessary protection for them and ensure there is sufficient provision to meet demand.

Benefits of allotment gardening

Allotments provide many benefits for plotholders and their families. Plotholders often find that the benefits for themselves also impacts on their local environment and community too.

Renting or visiting an allotment plot gives you an opportunity to enjoy, green spaces away from the pressures of modern living. Tending an allotment at your own pace provides regular physical exercise and occupies your mind.

Meanwhile, the produce you grow can contribute towards a balanced, healthy diet. If you garden organically you can even reduce the amount of herbicides and pesticides your body consumes.

Being part of the gardening community on an allotment site brings an opportunity to meet and share experiences with people from all walks of life - a chance to learn from others and mentor newcomers or simply have a chat to pass the time of day.

Children can benefit from spending time with their family on a plot, developing an awareness of where food comes from at a time when healthy eating and exercise are becoming increasingly important. Learning and fun can both take place on a plot.

People with a wide range of physical and mental health issues can find particular advantage from the health and social benefits of allotment gardening. Older people can find a particular congeniality on an allotment plot in later life.

Taking advantage of some, or all, of these benefits can give allotment ploholders a tremendous sense of well-being. A sense of place, relaxation and belonging can offer therapy and solace.

Who else like me has an allotment?

People from all walks of life are allotment ploholders. Renting an allotment gives an opportunity to meet people from many different backgrounds, age groups and cultures. People from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds growing foods from the UK and around the globe. Women enjoying the freedom of their own plots. Families learning together about where food comes from. Organic growers and competitive giant vegetable champions practicing their own particular techniques.

As well as meeting fellow ploholders on-site, many people now link up with ploholders in other parts of the country via allotments websites in order to swap growing tips, and share ideas and photographs (see Resources).



2. Provision

How to get an allotment

First of all, contact your local authority to find out where the nearest allotment sites are in your area. Councils usually own allotment land and will either be able to allocate you a plot right away or add your name to the waiting list if there is one. If you do have a choice, consider which site will be best for you. Visit the sites and talk to the plotholders there, they will be probably be able to tell you more information about the best plots. If you have a choice, think about how you will get there – it's best if the site is within easy walking or cycling distance from your home.

If there are no council allotments in your area, your council may be able to put you in touch with private sites.

How to formally request provision for allotments from your council

Each council decides for itself how much of its resources to devote to allotments. However, if a council considers there is a demand, it has a statutory duty to provide a sufficient quantity of plots and to lease them to people living in its area. If local people feel there is a demand for allotments that is not being met, they can get together any six residents who are registered on the electoral roll and put their case to the local authority to consider.

Equal opportunities

Allotments operate within the spirit of equal opportunities and are rented out on a first-come first-served basis, without preferential treatment. Your gender, race, cultural background, sexual orientation, religion or health, are not a



barrier to you renting an allotment. Anyone over the age of 18 can apply to rent an allotment.

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) exists to ensure people are not discriminated against on the grounds of their disability. Disability is not a barrier to you renting an allotment. People with additional needs relating to their health should let the allotment provider know at the time of their application for an allotment plot, or when health changes occur requiring adaptations after they have become a plotholder. Some allotment authorities have created specially adapted plots for disabled people, either on a communal or individual gardening basis. Other councils deal with adaptations on a case-by-case basis.

Plot condition

A council's minimum obligation is only to provide land for allotment gardening for its residents. This could just be earth in an uncultivated condition and the standard may vary from site to site. Most councils, however, are very keen for plotholders to be able to take advantage of the benefits of allotment gardening and go well beyond their statutory provision by investing time and money to provide a quality service for their plotholders. If you are offered a plot in poor condition, ask the allotment provider if they are able to take any remedial action.

What the law says

Small Holdings and Allotments Act (1908)

Places a duty on local authorities to provide sufficient allotments according to demand.

Makes provision for compulsory purchase of land by local authorities to provide allotments.

Some allotment authorities offer smaller ‘half-size’ or ‘starter’ plots for people new to allotment gardening: an opportunity to get going and learn on a smaller plot with the option to move onto a larger plot later. A similar option may also be available to people who currently have a large plot but who would like to downsize to a smaller plot.

Onsite facilities

Apart from ensuring that access to the allotment site is safe and not a barrier to people with disabilities, the allotment provider is not required to provide any further facilities for ploholders. It is, however, considered good practice for allotment providers to provide well-maintained facilities for their ploholders to ensure they obtain the full benefits of allotment gardening. For example:

- mains water supply
- toilet facilities
- fences, hedges and gates
- paths and hauling ways.



3. Tenancy agreement and rules

The tenancy agreement is a legally binding document, setting out the rights and responsibilities of the plot holder. You will be required to sign a tenancy agreement when you rent an allotment. The tenancy agreement tells you what you can and cannot do with your plot. You should receive a signed copy to keep for future reference. It is good practice for the allotment provider to provide you with a tenancy agreement in plain language to ensure it is easily understood, and an accompanying question and answer sheet.

Why is a tenancy agreement needed?

When renting an allotment you are taking on responsibility for a piece of land, which is entrusted to you. The allotment provider needs to ensure that you will manage the land in an appropriate way during your time as a plot holder, and ensure that the land will be in a fit state to rent out again to another person if you decide to move on. Everyone renting an allotment plot needs to understand their responsibilities; the tenancy agreement formalises this.

What to expect to be included

Just as no two allotment sites are exactly the same, tenancy agreements vary between allotment providers. There are, however, some issues that are required by law to be included:

- Rent amount you have to pay, including water charges, renting sheds or other structures.
- When the rent is due by, who the rent is collected by, and how the rent is calculated for a proportion of the year.
- Rent arrears.
- Prevention of nuisance and annoyance.
- The use of barbed wire.
- Prohibition of sub-letting to other people by the plot holder.
- Determination of tenancy and notices to quit.
- Compensation.
- Observance of conditions of lease.
- Prohibition of trade or business.
- Erection of sheds, greenhouses and other structures.

- Keeping of livestock including bees.

Additional items and issues may be mentioned in the tenancy agreement; these terms will depend on local circumstances and by-laws in operation.

Allotment plots are normally leased for the period of one year, although this can be renewed indefinitely. The tenancy agreement will usually include provision for the tenancy to be ended by either the plot holder or the authority. If the plot holder has not complied with the terms of the tenancy agreement, the allotment provider may give one month's notice. In other circumstances the allotment provider will need to give the plot holder 12 months' notice.

Understanding your responsibilities

It is important that you read and understand the responsibilities in your tenancy agreement. You need to conform to the tenancy conditions, not only to protect your own tenancy, but also to ensure that the site as a whole is not brought into disrepute.

Rules

As well as signing a tenancy agreement, many allotment sites have additional or specific rules created by the allotment provider. Rules are in addition to, and do not replace, the tenancy agreement and are about ensuring day-to-day harmony on the site. A copy of the rules should be given to the plot holder at the start of the tenancy. Some allotment sites include additional rules within the tenancy agreement itself.

What the law says

Allotment Act (1922)

"...an allotment not exceeding 40 poles* in extent which is wholly or mainly cultivated by the occupier for the production of vegetables or fruit by himself or his family."

*40 poles is equivalent to 1210m². 1 pole = c. 30 ¼ yards². The terms 'rod', 'pole' and 'perch' are interchangeable.

Being a good neighbour

A desire to garden means you have much in common with your fellow plotheholders. There are, however, some matters of social politeness to consider when you take an allotment or, if you are an existing plotheholder, when a newcomer arrives. Simple things, such as the time you light a bonfire or play a radio, may impact negatively upon your neighbour's enjoyment of their plot.

- Set ground rules for visitors and children on your plot. It's sociable and fun to have friends and family visit your plot – time to show off your hard work, share some produce, or have a family picnic, but do explain to your visitors and your own children that time on-site for other plotheholders may be the only chance they have of quiet time to themselves. Show them where your plot's boundaries are, and explain that other people's plots are strictly off-limits.
- Give your own and visitors' children firm ground rules about what they can and can't do on your plot.
- Be sensitive to other people's cultural practices and their space.



What to do if you have a problem

If a problem arises, you should contact your allotment provider. If you are unsure about the right person to contact, you should contact the person who first arranged your tenancy agreement.

4. Rents and funding

The allotment provider decides how much the annual rent will be, taking into account the cost of managing the site, local needs and any special circumstances.

There is no statutory process of appeal about rent charges. If you are unhappy about the charges, you should take your case up directly with the allotment provider. The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG) can advise you (see Resources).

How much rent you are likely to pay

Rents vary from place to place. In some areas it may be as low as £5 or as high as £100 or more per year. Your allotment provider may give you an option to pay in instalments, by prearranged agreement.

How rent charges are calculated

Some allotment authorities charge rent at a set amount per square metre, so that the amount you pay depends on the actual size of the allotment you rent. Alternatively, your rent may be charged at the same blanket rate for all plots, regardless of size.

Incentives and concessions

Allotment providers should ensure that plots are free of hazards at the time of setting up new tenancies. If you are taking on a derelict plot, your allotment provider may make additional arrangements to clear very heavy perennial weed infestations. Your allotment provider may offer one year's free rent to encourage you to clear and cultivate it. Many allotment providers offer some form of reduced concessionary rent to people on state benefits.

Paying your rent

Who you pay your rent to and how should be shown in your tenancy agreement. Rent is normally paid in advance.

If you do not pay your rent in accordance with the terms of your tenancy agreement, you could lose your tenancy. If you are unable to pay your

rent because of financial hardship you should inform your allotment provider immediately.

Water charges

Some allotment providers may include water charges in the rent, or charge a separate water bill. Most allotment sites' water supply is metered so that the actual amount used by all plotholders is paid for, rather than a bill based on rateable-value. Restrictions may apply about how you use water on site, e.g. hosepipes may not be allowed or water butts may be insisted upon. Refer to your tenancy agreement for this information.

How the rent is spent

For many allotment providers, the rent from plotholders is the only income money received for allotments. The allotment provider will most certainly have to pay the following general outgoings in order to keep the site running: public liability insurance, affiliations to national organisations, general maintenance (e.g. skips, or fence repairs), water bill to the local water company, administrative and promotional costs. If the allotment provider does not own the land outright, e.g. an allotment association operating under a devolved management lease or a council renting land to provide allotments, then a land rent will also need to be paid.

Council Tax subsidy for council sites

The rent you pay is usually heavily subsidised by council taxpayers in the area. Given heavy development pressures and the high market price of land, allotment rents might well be much higher if there were no subsidy.

What the law says

Allotments Act 1950

The law says that an allotment must be let at a rent that a tenant may be reasonably expected to pay.

5. Health and safety

All activities carry an element of risk and allotment gardening is no exception. Everyone needs to take health and safety seriously, but it is also very important for plotholders not to become “litigation paranoid” and to approach the issue sensibly.

New and existing plotholders have a responsibility (duty of care) to anyone on their plot, regardless of whether they have given permission for them to be there. You should act responsibly and comply with any health and safety instructions mentioned in the tenancy agreement, and any subsequent information given by the allotment provider. Health and safety only becomes unmanageable when responsibilities are neglected.

The allotment provider should ensure that the plot is clear of hazards at the time of leasing to a new plotholder. New plotholders should be advised about any ongoing health and safety risks or hazards on the allotment site at the time of taking on the plot and signing the tenancy agreement.

If you are not sure of your own responsibilities as a plotholder, ask your allotment provider about health and safety and what your own responsibilities are. It is good practice for allotment providers to welcome enquiries from plotholders about health and safety.

How to report hazards and concerns

Plotholders should report concerns about health and safety on their plot, or the site, to their allotment provider as soon as they occur. It is good practice for the allotment provider to have a system for plotholders to report day-to-day hazards and incidents to them. This is usually a list of contact details on a site notice board or a named contact in your tenancy agreement. You should also let any visitors to your plot know about any ongoing health and safety issues you are aware of.

Personal safety

Allotment gardeners often spend long periods of time alone on their plot, so it's a good idea to let someone know where you are and what time you will return home. Contact your local police for information about personal safety and crime prevention. Contact the Royal Society

for the Prevention of Accidents for health and safety advice. Contact the Suzy Lamplugh Trust for personal safety advice (see Resources).

Vandalism

Most of the time allotments are havens of peace in an otherwise busy world, where plotholders put in many hours of work.

In order to reduce the risk of vandalism, it is good practice for the allotment provider to ensure that adequate security measures, such as good fences and hedges, are in place and that plotholders know how to use them. Plot Watch schemes and patrols by Community Support Officers can act as a deterrent. Plotholders should always report instances of vandalism to the police and obtain an incident number, as well as informing the allotment provider of the incident.

Cutting down chemical use

You can do your bit for the environment by relying less on chemical pesticides and fertilisers. There are organisations that can give you help and advice to help you cut down your chemical use. (see Resources).

Plotholders have a duty of care to store, use and dispose of pesticides and fertilisers properly. This includes weed killers, rat poisons, fungicides and soil sterilants. Pesticides should never be decanted into any other container. Pesticides should never be brought into the UK from other countries. They should always be stored well out of reach of children and locked away.

Disposal of pesticides and fertilisers

Plotholders should contact their council waste management department for information about facilities for the safe disposal of surplus pesticides and fertilisers. Pesticides should never be included in household rubbish, burnt, placed in skips, or poured into any kind of drainage system or watercourse.



What the law says

Occupiers' Liability Act (1957)

Places a common duty of care on anyone involved in allotment management to ensure their allotment site(s) is run in as safe and appropriate manner as possible.

Control of Pesticides Regulations (amended) (1997)

Places responsibility on anyone who uses or stores pesticides to ensure all reasonable precautions to protect the health of humans, creatures and plants, safeguard the environment and avoid the pollution of water.

6. What you can and can't do on your plot

Gardening within the rules

The Allotments Acts state that your allotment is mainly for growing vegetables and fruit for your own and your family's use. This is the basis on which your plot is rented to you. Allotment gardening does, however, bring associated leisure benefits, which are also acceptable.

It is essential that any activities you carry out on your plot are acceptable within the terms and conditions set out in your tenancy agreement. You should not change the nature of the plot in a way that makes it less valuable nor should your activities change your plot in a way that could affect the allotment provider's ability to rent it out again should you leave. Occasionally, some activities may actually threaten the future of your allotment site, as they change the legal designation of the land-use from that of allotments land, e.g. using your plot for commercial purposes.

Although restrictions on what you can and can't do on your plot will differ from area to area, some are generic to all allotment sites. It is always best to check your tenancy agreement in the first instance and consult your allotment provider to find out about restrictions that apply in your area. Examples of common restrictions are given below.

Sheds

These will not only provide you with shelter, but also storage. Many allotment authorities have regulations regarding the size, shape and colour of sheds. This is to prevent allotment sites from appearing untidy. You may need to apply in writing to your allotment provider to install any shed or structure, e.g. greenhouse or polytunnel.

Ponds

Ponds can be very attractive and provide a habitat for wildlife, but they can also present a danger to very young children. The Allotments Regeneration Initiative (see Resources) Health and Safety on Allotments pack has a detailed section about ponds on allotments.

Sales

You are not permitted to run your allotment plot as a business. You may only sell genuine surplus produce from your plot – or give it away. You cannot sub-let your plot or sell it.

Water

Some allotment providers do not allow hosepipes or sprinklers, other than to fill water storage containers which should remain covered when not in use. You should check with any local byelaws or regulations that apply to your site - you may not be permitted to use a hosepipe at any time. If hosepipes are allowed, you must comply with any temporary restrictions imposed by your local water provider

Bonfires

Bonfires can cause a nuisance to neighbours and other ploholders and most allotment authorities apply very strict conditions. Most common is a ban on bonfires during certain months of the year (usually spring and summer) or limited permission for bonfires during certain hours and weather conditions. Your allotment provider's insurance may impose additional conditions on bonfires. The burning of painted timbers, plastics and other non-plant material can also cause soil pollution by heavy metals and other contaminants.

Waste disposal

Your allotment provider may provide a skip annually or more regularly, to dispose of rubbish accumulated on site. You should not bring items onto your plot unless you know they will serve a useful gardening purpose and you know how you are going to dispose of them appropriately.

7. Livestock and beekeeping

Which livestock can be kept on allotments?

Provided the plot is used mainly for growing vegetables and fruit, ploholders are allowed to keep hens (but not cockerels) and rabbits on their allotment, although this can be restricted by local by-laws. You should contact your allotment provider in the first instance if you wish to keep livestock or bees. Any ploholder wishing to keep animals should expect the allotment provider to carry out spot checks, with or without notice, on livestock and their welfare conditions.

Your livestock responsibilities

Subject to local authority regulations you may also be allowed to keep certain other livestock, but do bear in mind that animals should not be kept on allotments unless they can be provided with an appropriate environment and adequate care. At the very minimum, you will need to adhere to the following responsibilities, conditions and associated costs:

- suitable insurance in case the animal strays and causes damage or injury
- build suitable secure fences and structures to make sure the livestock cannot escape

and have the correct living environment that also enhances the site

- provide full contact details with 24 hour contact numbers in case of emergencies.

You must not let livestock become a health risk or a nuisance. You may be legally required to have formal identification for some animals, similar to an “equine passport”. You will also need to keep up-to-date with, and be prepared to abide by, regulations concerning animal welfare and any other emergency restrictions issued by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, e.g. slaughter orders during a disease epidemic. A free Factsheet, ‘The welfare of animals on allotments’, is available from the RSPCA.

Beekeeping

Beekeeping can be a rewarding pastime and help to enhance local biodiversity. Ploholders wishing to keep bees on their allotment should obtain the permission of the allotment provider. Your allotment provider may insist that you take part in accredited training before you can keep bees, limit the number of hives you can have, or stipulate their location on your plot. You should be prepared for the associated costs of installing hives, equipment, protective clothing, insurance and training. You should also consider joining the British Beekeeper’s Association (see Resources).



8. Protection and legislation

The areas of allotment law that are likely to be of most interest to plotheolders are summarised here.

Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908

Consolidated all previous legislation and laid down basis for all subsequent legislation.

Placed a duty on local authorities to provide sufficient allotments, according to demand. Made provision for local authorities to purchase compulsorily land to provide allotments. Established the framework for the modern allotments system.

Land Settlement Facilities Act 1919

This Act was mainly to assist returning servicemen and opened up allotments to all, not just the 'labouring population'. The Act made metropolitan borough councils allotment authorities for the first time.

Allotments Act 1922

This Act was established to provide allotment tenants with some security of tenure. It also provided tenants with greater compensation at the termination of their tenancy and limited the size of an allotment to one-quarter of an acre, specifying that it should be used mostly for growing fruit and vegetables.

Allotments Act 1925

Required local authorities to recognise the need for allotments in any town planning development. Established 'statutory' allotments, which a local authority cannot sell or convert to other purposes without Ministerial consent. This Act was intended to facilitate the acquisition and maintenance of allotments, and to make further provision for the security of tenure for tenants.

Allotments Act 1950

This included:

- amendment of the provisions relating to rents that may be charged for allotments

- extension of period of notice to quit to 12 months for allotment gardens
- compensation payable to plotheholder at whatever season of the year a tenancy terminates
- making plotheholders who have allowed their plot to deteriorate through neglect liable to pay compensation on quitting
- allowance of certain forms of livestock (hens and rabbits) to be kept, although this can be, in some cases, restricted by local by-laws.

Other legislation which may be relevant to plotheolders includes:

- **The Local Government Act 1972** - Amended the allotments legislation in a number of matters of detail, e.g. by removing the requirement upon local authorities to establish allotments committees (contained in Section 12 of the Allotments Act 1925).
- **The Human Rights Act (1998)** - Gives legal effect in the UK to certain fundamental rights and freedoms contained in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). There are 16 basic rights taken from the European Convention on Human Rights. These rights not only affect matters of life and death like freedom from torture and killing, but also affect your rights in everyday life: what you can say and do, your beliefs, your right to a fair trial and many other similar basic entitlements. At a local level the Act requires local authorities and their agents to ensure all policies, practices and procedures do not contravene the Act and that all decisions taken which affect people comply with the Act.

Other Acts which have impacted upon allotments include the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980 and the Acquisition of Land Act 1981.

Allotment site designation

There are three different types of allotment site. It is important that you know the status of your allotment site as this could affect your rights.

- Statutory allotments are parcels of land acquired or appropriated by the local authority specifically for use as allotments. These sites cannot be sold or used for other purposes without the consent of the Department for Communities and Local Government
- Temporary allotments are on land which is allocated for other uses, but leased or rented by an allotments authority. Temporary allotments are not protected from disposal in the same way that statutory allotments are.
- Privately owned land can also be let for use as allotments. These plots have the same legal status as temporary allotment sites, but the local council has no control over them.

Legal advice

The legislation relating to allotments is very complex. If you have a specific legal enquiry, you should contact your allotment provider in the first instance for clarification of the law with respect to your circumstances. Further clarification may be needed, via a legal professional.

The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (see Resources) provides a comprehensive and specialist legal service to its members and is also required to be formally notified and consulted about the disposal of statutory allotment sites.

Some solicitors will work on a pro bono basis without charging a fee, if a legal matter is in the public interest. Professionals4free provide free legal advice to voluntary and community groups (see Resources).



9. How do I get started?

Once you've decided that you want an allotment you may find it useful to talk to your fellow plotheholders, in addition there are lots of resources and organisations that can give you advice to get you started (see Resources).

This section aims to give a few simple pointers based on the experience of real people who have started from scratch, just like you.

Commitment

The first thing to realise is that having an allotment can be a wonderful experience. The more you put into it, the more you'll get out. At the very least you will need to be able to commit several hours a week, come rain or shine. Hopefully you'll be so interested and enjoy it so much that you will put in more time.

If you have to go onto a waiting list, learn about growing while you wait – there are plenty of books and magazines that give simple, month-by-month guidelines on what to grow and when. Local groups may run classes and the best advice is often from other gardeners – but remember there is always more than one way of doing things.

Your plot

Firstly, check your new plot for hazards, although your allotment provider should check your plot before it is leased to you. It's best to be on the lookout for anything from broken glass to barbed wire, rusty nails, brambles and nettles. If you have children, wait until you are happy that they will be safe there before you bring them along.

Start with getting some basic tools for the job, including protective gloves and suitable footwear. All good hardware stores and garden centres have a range of tools. Spend more on a few decent tools, rather than buying lots of cheap ones. You may find that after experimenting you rely on just one or two essential tools.

Consider whether to get the whole plot under control at once as it may be too much to do. Clearing your plot a little at a time is often more useful: this way you'll concentrate your efforts on a patch that can become productive quickly.

As soon as you clear a patch, get some produce growing in it. If you don't, weeds will be back. Small beds with paths in-between enable you to prepare only the soil that you are going to grow in. Start off modestly: 'pioneer crops' like potatoes or squashes are simple to grow and help break up the soil. Using plants that act as "green manures" will help by suppressing weeds and adding to soil fertility, e.g. buckwheat.

You can cover areas that are waiting to be cleared with a mulch to suppress the weeds - this will make it easier to clear and prepare later. There are a variety of methods for mulching, from organic materials to black plastic membrane.

Identifying weeds can be difficult when you are new to gardening. It's best not to assume what type of weeds you have or how to remedy them, as you can actually increase the numbers of many weeds by not dealing with them correctly. Identifying weeds and other plants can easily be done by asking other plotheholders, looking at pictures in gardening books, the internet or other gardening literature.

It is important that plotheholders try to reduce their consumption of water. They can do this by using mulches and by collecting rainwater through drainpipes and water butts. Composting is an effective and environmentally friendly way of recycling organic waste. Homemade compost will help improve the fertility and structure of your soil. Be careful NOT to compost perennial weeds as they will most likely survive the composting process and simply regrow when you spread your compost on your plot. Most local councils have schemes selling compost bins available at a reduced rate, or you could build your own. You could get together with other plotheholders to get a more regular flow of compost. Your allotment provider or allotment association may be able to advise on composting techniques.

Remember - taking on an allotment is a long-term commitment. Do not be discouraged when things do not go according to plan. but celebrate your successes and enjoy the fruits of your labour. Invite family and friends round to help harvest and eat what you have grown.

10. Resources

Allotments Regeneration Initiative (ARI)

Factsheets covering a wide range of topics particularly of interest to allotment associations or others interested in regenerating allotment sites. Topics covered include: fundraising, health and safety, installing toilets on allotment sites etc. Newsletter and advice concerning allotment regeneration.

Tel. 0117 963 1551
ari@farmgarden.org.uk
www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari

National Allotment Gardens Trust (NAGT)

A registered charity aiming to assist in all areas of promotion and allotment regeneration.

Tel. 01752 363 379
www.nagtrust.org

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG)

Tel. 0117 9231 800
admin@farmgarden.org.uk
www.farmgarden.org.uk

National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG)

Tel. 01536 266 576
natsoc@nsalg.demon.co.uk
www.nsalg.org.uk

Council for Voluntary Service (CVS)

Advice and support for community groups.

Tel. 0114 278 6636
nacvs@nacvs.org.uk
www.nacvs.org.uk

Garden Organic (formerly HDRA)

Tel: 0247 630 3517
enquiry@hdra.org.uk
www.gardenorganic.org.uk

Growing Schools Programme

Resource for teachers linking the curriculum to the 'outdoor classroom', part of a government initiative.

growing.schools@dfes.gsi.gov.uk
www.teachernet.gov.uk/growingschools

Royal Horticultural Society

Tel. 020 7834 4333
info@rhs.org.uk
www.rhs.org.uk

www.professionals4free.org.uk

Free legal and other advice given by professionals to voluntary and community groups.

Useful publications

- Kitchen Garden magazine
- 'The Allotment Handbook' by Caroline Foley. Publisher: New Holland Publishers (UK) ISBN: 1-84330-583-6
- 'Allotment gardening – an organic guide for beginners' by Susan Berger. Publisher: Green Books. ISBN 1-903998-54-9
- Green Essentials Organic Guides, 'Successful allotments' - a little full colour booklet on starting an allotment. £3. ISBN: 1-904-60121-9
www.impactpublishing.co.uk

