

One Tree Hill allotment Society – New Starter Document

Welcome and Introduction

Growing fruits and vegetables can be easy, you do not need a lot of space or knowledge, you will discover a lot as you go, so no need to worry if you are inexperienced, all you need is enthusiasm and a sunny and sheltered place with access to water

Taking on your Plot

Before you start on your plot, have a look around and chat with other plot holders, see what they grow and how they manage their plots. Your neighbours have an interest in your success so that your plot does not revert to weeds! So do ask for advice, help and ideas.

Think about the amount of time you have and your ability, so you can decide what you think would suit you need, if you are not sure talk to any committee member.

Planning your plot

Traditionally food crops have been grown in long narrow plots which can be worked from both sides, but you can design your plot however it suits you.

Plots and beds should be aligned so that the long length runs north-south. This means that the whole bed will receive sunshine during the day. Plant in rows east-west across the bed, with the tallest crops at the northernmost end so that they do not cast shadows over other crops.

Planning advice:

Draw a plot plan, think about what vegetables you want to grow and where you will sow them. Please note you must cultivate the entire plot, there is no need to reserve a part for grass or wildlife.

Think about plant groups:

- Root vegetables – carrots, beetroot, turnips
- Brassicas – cabbage, broccoli, cauliflowers
- Legumes – peas, beans
- Potatoes

Work out a rotation plan, usually for three years to keep crops moving around the plot. Growing the same family in the same place removes nutrients from the soil and can lead to pests and disease.

Don't try to take on too much at once, the first year for any bed can be hard work, but using your time to prepare and plan will pay off later.

Keep a diary – find out what timings, crops and varieties work best for you.

Step By Step

1. Set aside areas for a shed, a compost heap, water butt, children's flower space or a space for sitting. Use a shady place for these. As it's harder to grow there.
2. Work out paths between the beds, along the length and across the plot.
3. Set aside space for any permanent beds – fruit bushes, asparagus, strawberries, herbs and rhubarb.
4. Work out how many beds or squares you will have in the remaining space.

Preparing the Ground

- The soil at our allotment is London clay, it is more difficult to manage but it holds water well.
- Clear any rubbish.
- Cut down all weeds and start your compost heap.
- How to dig clay soil:
 1. Dig in the autumn and early winter when it's relatively dry
 2. Allow winter frosts to work on the clay and break it down
- Prepare one or two beds at a time – dig the land over, removing weeds at their roots, add these to your compost heap.
- Allow two or three days and when it's dry, tread and rake the soil surface.
- Alternatively, cover the beds with plain cardboard and add mulch on top.

Digging Tips

Digging is a key part of your preparation. Take it slowly. It's better to do short spells regularly rather than infrequent visits. Don't compromise on the depth of the dig, but try different "slice" sizes, to avoid getting over tired – as the beginning your muscles will not be used to the movements.

There is a lot of information in books or on the internet and ask someone else on the site.

What to Sow

How do you decide what to grow? growing things you like to eat is a good start, as one of the greatest pleasures of growing your own food is eating it afterwards.

Grow potatoes to clear the soil of weeds.

Choose a small selection of the easier and more reliable vegetables – peas, broad and French beans, beetroot, parsnip, onion and shallot sets and leeks.

There are plenty of easy to grow food crops to choose from and seed packets always include details of sowing and harvesting times.

Raised Beds

Root crops such as carrots, beetroot, turnips and parsnips are strong rooted and will withstand windy weather so are suitable. Salad crops such as lettuce, radish, rocket, spinach and herbs such as basil, and parsley are ground hugging and so are also suitable.

Taller vegetables such as peas, beans and tomatoes need more support so would be best grown at a low level with some supporting canes.

When to Sow and Plant

Lots of information on when to sow is available and timings can also vary between varieties. It is always useful to look at the back of seed packets, you can also buy some items as small plants.

You can start early by growing seeds in greenhouses or on window sills or by using cloches or cold frames, which are a cover of plastic or glass that can be bought from gardening stores or made. But remember this is just a guide; timings can change between years depending on how warm the season is.

Our main sowing season is from March to May. Do not plant too early as this may result in losing your seeds and young plants, look around and ask experienced members for advice, which they will happily provide. Some vegetables such as runner beans, tomatoes and courgettes can be killed by late spring frosts.

Some crops can be sown in the autumn. examples are onions, beetroot, broad beans, carrots, cauliflowers, courgettes, early potatoes, early sown peas, radish, spring onions, turnips and winter spinach.

Various vegetables can be sown in October for the spring season, these include Japanese onions, early cabbage. This will encourage you to attend the site in winter and remember our climate is a lot warmer now!

Months – What to sow?

January: Radishes under cloche outside, tomatoes, leeks and onions in heated greenhouse or on windowsill.

February: (weather permitting), peas, broad beans, start getting seed potatoes.

March: time for sowing broad beans, brussels sprouts, leeks, onions, parsnips, early peas onions (sets and winter), shallots, early turnip, early potatoes Under cloche -celeriac, celery, tomatoes, cucumber, summer cabbage, early carrot

April: **The main month for outdoor sowing.** Broad beans, beetroot, broccoli, summer cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, lettuce, peas, spinach, turnips, leeks and onions, summer radish, potatoes (second early planted early, main crop late in month) parsnip, asparagus, sow French beans under cloches.

May: French beans, runner beans, beetroot, carrots, outdoor cucumbers, marrows, courgettes, mange-tout, spinach, broccoli, (sprouting & calabrese), winter cabbage, kale, kohlrabi, summer radish, swede, tomato (plant outdoors), pumpkin, squash, and sweet corn.

Finish sowing broad beans, summer & winter cabbage, broccoli & cauliflower.

Planting time for brussels sprouts, celeriac and tomatoes.

June: mainly planting out rather than sowing, although you can continue successional sowing of lettuce, French beans and radishes.

Finish sowing beetroot, carrots & swedes.

plant out broccoli, early potatoes, brussels sprouts, sweet corn, celery, leeks, courgettes, marrows, outdoor tomatoes & cucumbers

July: Sow chicory, winter radish, and main crop turnips, continue to plant lettuce & peas, finish planting broccoli, winter cabbage & leeks.

August: Sow winter spinach, short rooted carrots, Japanese onions, winter radishes, main crop turnips, salad onions.

September: Rocket, over-wintering onions, sow lettuce under cloches.

October: Finish planting spring cabbage, plant garlic.

Looking After Your Crops

Watering

crops need loving care and attention, to get the best results for your efforts you should water them little and often rather than soaking the crops weekly. try to water before or after the midday sun when the ground will dry the water before it can benefit the plants.

Remember: water the soil, not the plants, it is possible to drown or rot your plants with too much water, plants should be fed occasionally, especially if compost has not been incorporated into the soil.

Weeding

Weeding can seem like a tedious task but it is essential as weeds compete with your plants for light and nutrients. if you plant vegetables in rows you to prevent weeds will learn the vegetable plants from the weeds.

One of the best ways to prevent weeds from growing is to not let them flower, as they will then drop seeds. if they are a root type of weed, then its best to dig them out as soon as you can.

You can use mulch, which is a covering of materials that will protect the soil from drying out and will help prevent weed growth. mulch can be organic or man made.

- mulch mats. length of material which you can cut to size and lie over the soil and around plants
- leaf mould, wood chip and compost are all mulches. lay them thickly around the plants but they will need to be renewed as they will biodegrade.
- stone chipping and gravel can also work as mulches, they also discourage slugs and snails.
- straw makes a good mulch which does encourage earthworms and can then be turned into soil as a green manure. its preferable to hay as it is weed free.
- compost makes a very good mulch if you have enough space, try for a 2 to 4 inch layer.

Pests

We do not use commercial pesticides or herbicides

Many pests invade allotments such as slugs, caterpillar, whitefly, carrot fly, and club root. however, there are also many insects and plants which reduce the damage these agricultural pests have on crops such as nasturtiums, calendula, French marigold, hoverflies, bees and wasps.

French Marigold

discourages and kills vegetarian nematodes when planted as a bed (but not so effective when use as a border).

repel whitefly and confuses cabbage and white butterflies when planted as a border to brassica crops.
encourages hoverflies which feed on aphids.

Nasturtiums

lures black fly away from broad bean crops, repels aphid from other crops, repels whitefly from brassica crops.

Alternatives

- use bee/ half grapefruit traps.
- hoe your patch regularly during spring and summer
- sprinkle eggshells around your patch
- **remove slug haven e.g. bits of plastic, scrap wood, which a cool damp environment**
- **Garlic, vinegar & water or lemon juice & water are good options for pest control**
- try attracting insects that can be an asset, such as bees, solitary bees, lacewing and ladybirds

Composting

composting is essential to add nutrients back into the soil and will give excellent results. many different techniques exist for composting material, in addition to traditional compost heaps you can use.

- teas made from nitrogen rich plants such as borage, nettles, nasturtiums and comfrey (Bocking 12 recommended as less likely to become a weed problem).
- Green manures (Phacelia, fodder radish and fenugreek are common plants used for this) which draw up nutrients from the sub soil and provide organic matter for the top soil when they are dug in.
- Worm composting, for traditional compost heaps the key is getting the mix of carbon (stalks, stems and woody bits) to nitrogen (soft green sappy stuff). roughly there should be 20-30 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen
- Try to add is separate layers of about 6 inches and water each layer a little before adding the next one.

Add to compost from the allotment and kitchen

- Most vegetables including brassicas heads and leaves and chopped brassica stalks.
- Fresh weeds, harvested before they seed
- Flowers and fresh grass clippings
- Fruit peels and waste

Other stuff high in nitrogen

- Manure, highest in nitrogen when its fresh
- Beer and brewing waste
- Coffee grounds and tea leaves

Things to avoid

- Brassica roots and potato plants, to avoid disease in your plot
- Animal products, dairy and fish, they attract vermin and may carry disease
- Faeces of carnivorous animals – like cats and dogs
- Glossy or coated paper – contains chemicals
- Cooked food – also attracts vermin
- Sewage sludge – can contain heavy metals
- Ash from burning treated wood, coal or charcoal

How much work you put into your compost heap will determine how quickly you get a nutrient rich soil. this means turning your heap regularly and keep the top covered. you can even sow nasturtiums on top instead of newspaper or old carpet to speed up getting your end product.

Organic Liquid Feed

Various teas can be produced by soaking nutrients rich plants species in a vat of water. The nutrient in the plants leach out into the water producing a liquid that you can use to give your crops a lift, remembering that liquid fertilisers are only a short-term fix.

Making the ‘tea’

- Soak your material (nettle, comfrey – Brocking 14 variety) with plain water in a bin
- Make sure to put a lid on and place out of the way of habitation, it will smell
- the mixture will be ready in two days to apply directly onto plants, if you leave for 2-4 weeks you will get a more concentrated mixture that needs to be diluted (1 part tea to 10 parts for watering; 1 part tea to 20 parts water for leaves)
- Make sure to stir concentrate every couple of days otherwise the water will become stagnant

Seasons

January

- Digging if weather allows
- Plan your rotation and seed order
- Start planting indoors

February

- Planting under cloche

March

- Prepare your vegetable beds
- Fork in over-winter green manure and mulches of manure/compost
- start sowing

April

- Peak time for outdoor sowing
- weeding by hoe to discourage slugs
- If planted last year, harvest broccoli, turnip tops, spring cabbage, rhubarb

May

- Weeding, watering if the weather is dry
- Watch for early signs of pests and disease
- Continue sowing, sow short summer manure
- Plant tender crops after frost risk has passed
- Harvest early sown lettuce and radish

June

- Weeding, watering if the weather is dry
- Watch for any pests or disease
- Sow short summer green manures
- Continue to sow although mainly a planting month
- Pick early sown broad beans

July

- Weeding, watering if the weather is dry
- Watch for any pests or disease
- Harvest broad beans
- Sow short summer green manure
- Harvest broad beans, early French beans, beetroot, greenhouse cucumbers and tomatoes, courgettes, shallots, onions, lettuce, pas, radishes etc.

August

- Sow over-wintering green manures
- Main time for harvesting much of your crop.

September

- Last chance to sow over-wintering green manures
- Getting close to the last opportunity to harvest tender crops – beans, sweetcorn, squashes that will not survive the first frost

October

- Still some harvesting
- Clean up beds – especially of any finishes crops which could harbour disease/pests

November

- Early digging? Or cover with mulch and leave it to spring
- remove large weeds from green manure beds

December

- A good time to clear slug shelters – rubbish, pots, plastic, wood, stone bricks
- Check crops in store, remove doubtful ones
- Gather winter spinach, swedes, turnips, cabbage, brussels sprout

Organic Gardening

Growing organically does involve more time and attention but the reward is worth it. Where possible, it is good to use products and methods that benefit both the local and wider environment. For example it may be good for your plot to use peat but it is not good for the peat bogs where the material comes from. Peat bogs are a valuable habitat for many plants and animals and have been degraded due to the demand for peat to be used in gardens. Alternatively, peat free composts do exist and are just as good!

Further Information

HDRA Garden Organic - www.gardenorganic.org.uk

The National Allotment Society - www.nsalg.org.uk

Royal Horticultural society – www.rhs.org.uk

Suggested Reading

Allotment Gardening, An organic Guide for Beginners – Susan Berger

How To Grow Perennial Vegetables – Martin Crawford

Of Cabbages and Kings – The History of Allotments – Caroline Foley

The New Vegetable & Herb Expert – D. G. Hessayon

Allotment Handbook – Simon Akeroyd

Backyard Composting – John Roulac

Allotment Month By Month – Alan Buckingham