



Getting Started

A short guide on how to start work on a new allotment without breaking your back or bank account - revised July 2015

With an ordinary garden, the best advice is usually to do as little as possible in the first year. You won't know what bulbs are waiting underground or which dry sticks will turn into an interesting bush in summer or autumn. You need time to appreciate the character of the garden and know what really needs changing .

That is not the case with allotments.

You may inherit some plants from a previous owner, maybe some fruit bushes or rhubarb, strawberry plants or raspberry canes, even asparagus if you're lucky. But mostly you will be told about those at the time and more often you will just get a great lump of soil. It may be bare or it may be covered with couch grass, bindweed, thistles and sundry unidentifiable stuff that spreads so quickly it covers your spade by lunchtime. Depending on the weather, it may be soggy or so dry it's like concrete. Around you will be seeds blown in the wind, looking for a home, below you the roots of nasty rough things you don't want. You need to gain control of all this and make the ground productive, to justify the rent and prove to the landlord that you are a serious tenant. It can seem overwhelming, especially if you have not been a gardener before, and a proportion of tenants give up in their first year, beaten into submission by the weeds, pests and bad weather.

But it doesn't have to be like that.

Let us assume the worst – a full sized plot covered with rough grass and weeds, taken over by a total novice in late winter or early spring when it is too cold and wet to take any action. It may have a broken down shed under a light dusting of snow and a few odds and ends of rusty barbed wire. You don't have many tools or much money, you don't have any help or a lot of time and you don't know where to start. What do you do first?

Dig or cover?

An increasingly popular solution is to cover the ground until you are ready for it, keeping out the light and weed seeds and preventing anything nasty from growing. You can buy special material for this purpose. It lets the water through but keeps the weeds down and the site shops keep supplies at low cost. You can use it later between rows of strawberries or around fruit bushes. This helps if you can't deal with all the plot at once, but sooner or later, you have to dig.



Dig, double dig or no dig?

Another popular idea is that we ought not to dig the soil. Don't tread on it or turn it over, just feed it with compost or manure then leave it alone so the worms can work through it and the natural soil structure won't be mashed up by your spade and boots. This is quite practical if you already have clean beds with pathways between them, containing no deep perennial weed roots. You may be lucky and inherit such a plot. If you don't, you will need to get all the rubbish out first and go over to 'no dig' afterwards, because there are certain things that you must not tolerate. It's you or them.

- Clear rubbish. If you have burnable rubbish – old twigs and broken bamboo canes etc – you can sometime burn that but ask first about the local rules on your site. You may need permission and might have to limit yourself to certain times. If you need to remove glass or plastic to the local tip and don't have a car then ask your Overseers or The Association about collection systems. It is unlikely that you will encounter any old asbestos but if you think you have then contact your overseers or The Association at once and leave it here until it has been inspected – it has to be handled by experts.
- Clear weeds. There are several options. If they are tall cut them down to the ground with a sickle. It might be useful to wear gloves and even long sleeves if you don't know what they are - nettles and thistles sting, giant hogweed causes blisters. Then you can (a) use a sharp spade to slice off the top layer of greenery and dig the earth or (b) dig directly through the grass to lift it in clumps. The first way gives you slices you can probably compost for later, but make sure it doesn't have any roots of couch grass left in it. Some people use a fork to wiggle about and then loosen it to lift a

whole clump, shaking the soil off. Others prefer a sharp spade to slice into it like a cake, cutting a bit-size piece from the sides and then the closest edge. Either way, don't try to take too much in one go. If using a spade, remember if you cut into any roots and leave small pieces behind they will grow again.

Whatever you do, it is wise to choose the right conditions. Digging clumps with a fork is easier if it has rained recently so the soil is slightly damp underneath. But it is always a bad idea to stand on any bare earth that is so wet it lets you sink in a leave footprints. This compacts the ground so it is (a) heavy to lift a spadeful and (b) too solid for roots to get through later. You may see people with bare earth using wooden boards to stand on so they can get to areas further from the path without compacting. It is hard to dig new ground that way, but it is not impossible if the rain keeps on too long. If the ground is very hard, especially if it has been bare and under the sun, then a sharp spade after a short rainstorm is easiest.

Of course, you could spray weed killer, but on a whole new plot that can be very expensive. If you ever do use it, watch out for windy days and don't let it drift onto other people's plots or walk it onto other area on your boots. Incidentally, if you want to be 100% organic, you can probably find out from the overseers whether the last tenant would have used chemicals and left residues. What you can never predict is what your neighbours will do next, so you might receive drift at the edges.

Once you have started to dig out the weeds you will get a supply of white roots from bindweed, couch grass and thistles that have to be destroyed. You cannot compost them or they just grow stronger. You can shake off the earth and put them in a heap to dry so you can burn them later (if bonfires are permitted on your site) or carry them away off site.

If you are lucky, and your land is more bare earth than weeds and grass, then you just have to choose your timing carefully. If the top is a crust that supports your weight but underneath is soft, it will be easy to dig. But if you turn it over then leave it in large lumps in the wind that will dry into concrete and be very hard to break up later. It needs to be broken up into medium lumps when it is still soft then raked more finely when it has dried slightly. In autumn, when you dig it over again to clear it out, you can leave larger lumps for the winter frosts to break down for you.

Choose your tools

Some people like to use petrol driven rotavators. These are expensive to buy, difficult to hire, noisy to use and are stolen from allotment sheds. But they do reduce effort. Just

remember if you haven't already removed the couch grass roots you will just chop them up and spread them about to make more weeds later on.



Another choice is between long or short handled spade. For the first dig in wet ground a short sharp spade with a traditional blade is often useful. Once the ground is loosened up then some people remove the annual back ache by using a longer handled spade to get more purchase without bending. These have been more commonly used in dry countries in southern Europe, but can now be purchased in the UK. Stainless steel spades stay cleaner but cost more. They can also be soft so bend more easily when used (improperly) to force our old roots.

As a minimum, you will need a spade, fork and rake of some kind. You may get all of those from freecycle or from site shops. A hoe is also very useful. Straight hoes (left) slice through the ground to cut down weeds. Draw hoes (right) slide along the ground



A cultivator is a three pronged instrument for breaking up lumps. You can make your own heavy duty one by bending over an old fork onto a new long handle



Remember that digging is hard work so if you are new to it take it easy and, at regular intervals sit down, admire your work and plan the next stage. That way, you are more likely to be here next year, and the year after that.



Some energetic souls believe it double digging. This means going down not one but two spade depths to get all the roots out and probable add some manure at the me time. It is not necessary and only needs to be done once. If you are ambitious, what you can do is:

- 1) dig out a row across and remove all the earth to a heap elsewhere. This makes a trench.
- 2) dig out another layer at the bottom of that trench and also remove that.
- 3) If you have any, now add a layer of rotted manure or compost to half fill the trench. (if you want some see below). If you don't have any, just make sure you have removed all the weed roots and stones.
- 4) Dig out the top later of the next row back to fill that trench.
- 5) Now dig out the second layer of the second trench.

If you have been adding manure then the filled trenches are going to be higher than they started. If not, just fill with earth to the old level.

This is hard work but makes sure you start with clean ground. Some people just do it to a small section, using it for specially important crops such as If you want to use the no dig system in the long run, you may wish to use this way of clearing your ground before you start. But for many people, just clearing out the weeds to one spade depth is enough.



If, having cleaned your ground, you then want to make paths around fixed beds so you don't tread on it again, you can use planks to cordon of the earth and lay pathways between the beds. This is increasingly popular as a way to make large areas more manageable, but wood is expensive. You ask your local timber merchant for gravel boards, which are pressure treated but unplanned lengths used at the bottom of fences and tend to be cheaper. If you explain what you want it for they may have special offers or other kinds of wood that are suitable. Or, of course, you can try Freecycle and see what other people are throwing out. But don't think you can make a rectangle and just pile new earth or compost on top of old weeds. They will grow back however deep your layers are. You have to clean it our first and make your beds afterwards. But if a whole plot seems overwhelming then dividing it up to clean one bed at a time is always helpful. And don't forget you are paying for the ground by area.

If you don't want to go that far – and many don't - you may still want to lay a path to walk on in wet weather and divide your crops. The old way as to keep a grass strip and just clip it back from time to time. In many sites you will see heaps of old shredded bark that can be laid between planks to make paths. It is provided free – first come first served - and if your site doesn't have any you can always collect it from those that do.

If it is laid deep enough it will keep weeds down and can be walked on even after heavy rain. Remember, of course, that it may make your ground acid and will take out nitrogen as it breaks down, so only lay it deeply where you don't want anything to grow for a year or two. Sometimes it is tempting to make paths very wide to cut down on weeding, but later you may want that growing area and will have to remove all the bark and dig it over after all.

On a smaller plot you may not need to bother with any of this, but you will still need to think about planning your crops in areas, and about rotation. The next section helps you to plan your area and tells you about crop rotation, nutrients, compost and manure.

Condition and rotate

You get better crops if you grow them in the right kind of soil, and you stay on top of pests and diseases by thinking about what each crop takes out of the soil or gives back to it. Feeding the soils and building up fertility is easy and doesn't mean buying a lot of expensive chemicals, especially if you use crop rotation. Each type of crop uses different nutrients and pests and diseases won't build up. Some like manure, some want lime, some actually prefer poor soil. You shouldn't add lime and manure to the same ground. If you grow carrots in manured ground they tend to fork. Runner beans add nitrogen to the ground rather than take it out, but cabbages need some added to get the biggest result.

Briefly, you can group crops into potatoes / legumes, onions and roots / brassicas and rotate them in that order. The RHS have a simple explanation on their web site <http://apps.rhs.org.uk/adviceresearch/Profile.aspx?pid=124>. A useful leaflet can be printed off at http://apps.rhs.org.uk/schoolgardening/uploads/documents/Crop-rotation-V5_1151.pdf.

For some reason, gardeners tend to bang on about composting even more than they do about weather, blackfly, caterpillars, taxes etc. There are thousands of pages in all sorts of gardening books going into great detail and you could buy all sorts of expensive containers to make it in. The cheapest advice is free from the RHS - <http://apps.rhs.org.uk/adviceresearch/profile.aspx?PID=444>. The cheapest containers are also free. Some sites have supplies of pallets – first come first served – which you can tie together to make a container.



Manure may also appear in free mini-mountains on some sites. Where it does not you can ask at the shops, ask your overseer for advice or check the web site to see if we know anywhere you can collect it from. The main thing to remember is that it ought to be well rotted before it goes onto the ground – ideally at least a year old. If you apply it fresh it will burn your crops and take nitrogen out of the soil in order to break down.

Sources of free information

There are plenty of experienced gardeners around who will be probably be happy to answer basic questions. Don't be surprised if three people give you five different 'best methods' between them, two of which will contain opposing views. You can spend a lot of money of expensive books with lots of pictures that tell you how to plant orchards and spend even more money. Second hand book shops are worth trying and sometime he older the book the more interesting it is, although Victorian editions often assume you have access to arsenic and other illegal solutions. A copy of *Your Kitchen Garden* by George Seddon and Helena Radecka (Mitchell Beazley/Edenlite) as £3.95 in 1975 and still has everything you are likely to need. It is now out of print but you can get second hand copies from around 50p through Amazon. Everyone else will recommend a different favourite book, and you can always use web sites such as

We have an extensive library of hints and tips on the website and you will also find her links to our Facebook pages where you can ask questions.

Some sites have plan and seed swaps to help you get started - check newsletters and noticeboards for the latest or nearest

Enjoy your allotment and, if you have any questions, just ask.
