



## Welcome to the Allotment Garden Movement

North Hertfordshire District Council Parks & Countryside Development Team would like to wish you every success in your allotment gardening.



# NORTH HERTS ALLOTMENTS

## Useful contacts

- NHDC Allotment Administration 01462 474000

## For advice about maintaining allotments

- Hitchin Allotment Association Mr Roger Sandy 01462 455907
- Baldock Allotment Association Mr Mick Camp 01462 893418
- Letchworth & District Gardeners Mrs Maureen Hersee 01462 742475 Association

## Useful websites

- The National Association of Allotment & Leisure Gardeners [www.nsalg.org.uk](http://www.nsalg.org.uk)
- The National Vegetable Society [www.nvsuk.org.uk](http://www.nvsuk.org.uk)
- Garden Organic [www.gardenorganic.org.uk](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk)

## Useful reading

- Robin Shelton – “Allotted time: two blokes one shed no idea” -2007
- Jane Perrone -“Allotment keeper's handbook: a down-to-earth guide” -2007
- Clare Foster – “Your allotment “ -2007
- Victor Osborne – “Digger's diary: tales from the allotment “ -2007
- Caroline Foley -“How to plant your allotment “ -2007
- Matthew Biggs – “Allotment days” -2007
- Michael Wale – “View from a shed” -2007
- A M Clevely – “Allotment book” -2006
- Lia Leendertz – “Half-hour allotment “ -2006
- Michael Rand – “Close to the veg: a book of allotment tales “ -2005
- Caroline Foley – “Allotment handbook “ -2004
- Michael Hyde – “City fields country gardens: (allotment essays) “ -1998
- Nell Bennett – “All the year round: an allotment diary “ -1994
- Susan Berger – “Allotment gardening: an organic guide for beginners “ -2005
- Caroline Foley – “Practical allotment gardening: a guide to growing “ -2002
- Anne Algar – “Organic allotment “ -1990
- Royal Horticultural Society – “RHS Allotment Handbook” -2010
- Readers Digest – “Food from your garden & allotment” – 2009
- Joe Hashman – “On the plot” – 2009
- A & G Bridgewater – “The Allotment Specialist – 2007
- John Harrison – “The essential allotment guide” – 2009
- Ruth Binney – “The allotment experience” -2009

# STARTING AN ALLOTMENT

## A beginners' guide

You have just been offered an allotment. It is probably overgrown and contains paraphernalia inherited from the previous tenant. You don't know what to do, so start here –



North Herts Allotments are 'sold as seen' so you will more than likely inherit timber, ironmongery, broken tools and sometimes a dilapidated shed. Many people feel utterly daunted when faced with an overgrown allotment. It's a frightening prospect if you have never grown vegetables or fruit before on a public allotment site, You want to get those seeds in right away but you will find that good preparation reaps benefits. Do not be overawed by neighbouring tidy plots whose owners spend most of their lives there. Everyone has to start somewhere.

The first step is to remove to the household waste site all materials that you think you will not need. Then take a little time to plan what you want to grow (and remember to grow only what you want to eat!), allow space for compost bins and a place to sit. You will also probably want to reserve an area for perennial crops such as rhubarb, asparagus or herbs. You may also wish to grow soft fruits on fans or cordons. Flowers which attract pest-eating insects and ponds to attract wildlife are an important part of an organic approach to your allotment. Bee-keeping and honey production are always a tantalising prospect but you will need permission from North Herts District Council to do so. Likewise with the keeping of any livestock.

You will need to get to know your soil. Clay is very fertile, good at holding water and nutrients, but can be cold, wet and difficult to work. Sandy soil is easy to work, easier to clear of weeds, and warms up quickly in spring. But it can leach nutrients very quickly and dry out in hot weather. Chalk can be hard to work but responds with the addition of plenty of nutrients. A Ph test can be useful to find the alkalinity or acidity of the soil. Your site representative will be able to help in knowing which crops do well on your particular site and those that do not.

High quality (and expensive) tools will last a lifetime. However allotments are not the safest of places to leave valuable tools. You will need a spade, fork, hoe, hand tools and a watering can. Cheap tools of reasonable quality can be found in most chain stores, bargains can be found in second-hand shops or at car boot sales. You may wish to have a shed for shelter where you can leave old and unattractive-looking tools, otherwise you will need to carry them back and forth or hide them in the compost heap. However, written permission is required from North Herts District Council for sheds, greenhouses or poly-tunnels.

To work -cut down all existing vegetation and then either use a herbicide obtainable from local retailers or cover the plot. A petrol strimmer will be your best friend here. They can be hired or perhaps loaned by the local Allotment Association. Covering the plot with black plastic, cardboard and grass clippings, hessian-backed carpets can all keep the weeds at bay temporarily but they can harbour slugs and snails and may not subdue pernicious weeds like the dreaded bindweed. Carpets can also produce toxic leaching of chemicals from their materials and first life as indoor floor covering. Then start cultivating a small, manageable area. This helps you from feeling overwhelmed. Hiring a rotavator may seem a way to get a quick start, but you will still need to remove perennial weeds first otherwise they will simply be cut up into little pieces and every piece then grows into a new plant making the situation worse than it was in the beginning. Grass can simply be turned over into the bottom of your digging trench. Annual weeds can go onto the compost bin. Perennial weeds or diseased plants should go in a black plastic sack, left and when unrecognisable, can then be added to the compost bin.

As you make headway on the allotment you can divide your growing areas into beds with paths running between each one. These beds are easy to maintain because they are not trodden on, compacting the soil. A good width is 1.2m (4ft). This will allow you to reach from either side of the bed to weed and plant. Hard edging around the beds can be beneficial but not essential.

Easy crops to start with are potatoes, beetroot, perpetual spinach, cut-and-come-again lettuce, French beans, pumpkins and in winter, purple sprouting broccoli.

Do not try to do everything at once, experiment with different crops and varieties. Many find that an allotment can be a source of great joy, satisfaction and relaxation as well as a little perspiration. Once bitten by the allotment habit, you may well keep harvesting for life

### **Useful checklist:**

Seeds	Hand hoe
Knife	Secateurs
String	Watering can
Canes	Drink and snack
Labels and marker pen	Rigid containers and bags for harvesting Notebook,
Spade	which should hold all your plans
Fork	A Pencil
Hoe	

## Useful tips

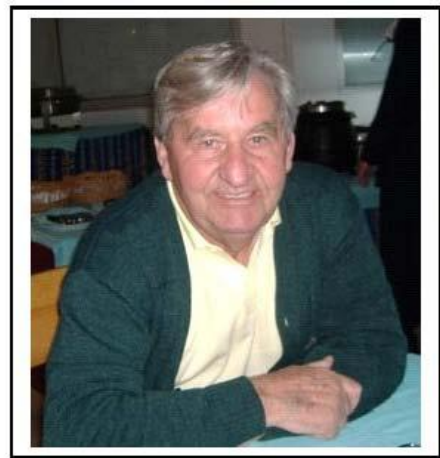
- Protect new plants with plastic bottle cloches. During dry weather water the bottom of the seed drill before sowing seed. Cover with dry soil. This will prevent a barrier called a 'cap' forming on the surface of the soil. A 'cap' will prevent small seedlings emerging from beneath the soil surface.
- Raise plants in modules, pots and boxes, then plant out sturdy transplants.
- Water transplants before lifting and 'puddle them in' – fill planting holes with water before transplanting.
- Grow pest and disease resistant varieties, e.g. blight resistant potatoes.
- Label rows and make a note of what you have planted where – labels may be blown away in the wind. Planning the following year will also be made easier if you have a written record.
- Experienced allotment holders recommend using a sharp hoe to hoe bare ground before weed seedlings appear. This will preserve moisture below the surface and ensure no weeds germinate. Always hoe in dry weather to ensure the weeds will die.
- Cover empty beds with year-old leafmould – particularly on next year's carrot and parsnip patch.
- Dig a trench and fill with kitchen waste over the winter. Grow runner beans here next year.

With reference to an article in "The Organic Way" by Janet Walker and Judy Steele

## What my Allotment means to me

Born into a farming family in the central highlands in the days before chemical farming was the norm I have always been very careful of what I eat and was appalled at the amount of hidden chemicals in our everyday foods. So on retirement I rented an allotment plot on the Runnalow site in Letchworth. it was the best move ever, exercise at your own pace, fresh uncontaminated fruit and vegetables and able to grow the best quality produce, for example every thing from asparagus through to sweet potatoes. I grow everything that is expensive in the shops. Do you know that greens lose over 60% of their nutritional value within four hours of being picked? have you ever tasted tomatoes or strawberries freshly picked? just think from plot to pot in minutes, not days, healthy eating that is the way to live!

Alex Smith – Runnalow Allotments



## Dye plants on the allotment

It all started about 7 years ago when I bought packets of Madder, Weld and Woad seeds from the HDRA. I sowed them in trays and waited. The Woad germinated quickly into a cabbage-like seedling. The madder (a relative of the weed Goose Grass or Cleavers) did nothing for weeks and then a single seedling came up. I potted the Woad up and propagated the Madder seedling by burying sections of its stem in the seed tray until I had several rooted plants. The Weld or Dyers Rocket was more of a problem. It's a fairly common wild flower (or in allotmenters language a weed) on waste ground in the local area. It tends to have a biennial habit and can grow up to six feet high on good ground in its second year but will often flower in its first year as a much smaller plant. The seeds are minute and when sowed direct into soil either does not germinate or are eaten. When sown in trays the seeds germinate but the seedlings don't always do well.

I set aside a small area of the allotment and planted my seedlings and waited to see how they would grow. Woad belongs to the cabbage family and is usually a biennial forming a lush rosette of fleshy leaves in the first year and a tall flower spike with a cloud of small yellow flowers in the second. It has a long white taproot which can go down deep into the soil even when the plant is young. Madder, a perennial which looks like Cleavers on steroids, needs some support and grows thick orange roots which go deep into the subsoil. It propagates itself by putting out long underground stems like nettles and in August it produces a profusion of tiny yellow flowers that occasionally develop into a black berry.

At first I had no idea how to use the plants for dyeing but over the following 3 years I had enough plant material and books on the subject to have a go. In the meantime I had encouraged my partner Susan to take up spinning and we had obtained some fleeces from an

organic farm in Norfolk. The value of fleece is currently very low and some farmers seem to have trouble even giving it away.

Our first attempt at dyeing from Woad was a terrible disappointment. I had picked nearly the whole crop of first year leaves (the books said second year leaves are no good). We took these along to a local meeting of North Herts. Spinners, Weavers and Dyers Guild where we followed a recipe to extract the blue indigo dye. After a couple of hours work and a great deal of puzzled frowning and conflicting advice from Guild members we had to admit total defeat, having not seen even a hint of blue at any point in the process. Later we found out that we had used a chemical that had been stored so long it had degraded and lost its power. Later in another attempt at home we used the wrong ingredient all together – a dye fixative rather than “Colour Run Remover” which dissolves dye. However at least on this later occasion we did manage to get some blue, even it did all end up as sludge at the bottom of the dye bath.

I was despondent for months afterward while we tried to work out what had gone wrong. The Woad was all used up and it would be the following year before we could have another go. Susan remained optimistic and during the year tried some other plant materials. Dahlia flowers, which she happened to be growing on the allotment, were a great success producing bright yellows and oranges.

A great deal of experimentation has gone on since then and we've grown many more types of dye plant including Dyers Coreopsis, Dyers Chamomile and Japanese Indigo which is a riverside member of the bistort or knotweed family from Japan. All our plants are a delight to grow and usually put on a good show of colour from flowers and foliage. We have now been able to dye wool, silk and cotton in all the colours of the rainbow and have run workshops for other interested people. We are hoping to put on more workshops and sell some of our dyed fleece.

If you are interested in finding out more about growing dye plants and dyeing please contact us or the North Herts Guild of Spinners, Weavers and Dyers.

Ashley Walker – Ransoms Allotments



## My Allotment Kingdom

As I approached retirement, and having grown runner beans and tomatoes along with a few herbs near the back door over the years, but never, due to work and domestic commitments, had the time to grow anything more. I had the vague idea that I would like to grow a lot more vegetables when I had the time. So when I retired I applied for an allotment, as luck would have it I was offered a plot within the year.

So what to grow? Reading through the plethora of gardening magazines and checking the various gardening books that I have accumulated over the years and listening to old allotment hands, I decided that it would be a good idea to grow potatoes to help the ground. I checked out the various varieties that were available, and I was surprised by how many varieties there are. I decided that I want to grow a mixture of the older varieties and modern varieties of potatoes. I selected Edzell Blue, Ratte, International Kidney, Witchill, Pentland Javelin, Foremost, Swift, Red Duke of York, Maris Peer, Desiree. This was a mixture of early, second early and main crop. My results for the season were somewhat mixed, the Desiree gave me a good harvest, the Foremost International Kidney and Pentland Javelin were a reasonable harvest, the Edzell Blue, Ratte, Witchill, were somewhat mediocre, I blame myself for not watering them enough when the potatoes were in flower. The major failure was the Swift, unfortunately they suffered from Mr and Mrs Slug and family dining out in style.

My plan for next season is to grow a small number of the more traditional varieties, these include Mr Little's Yetholm Gypsy, Highland Burgundy Red, Salad Blue, Skerry Blue, Shetland Black, and Dunbar Rover plus some modern varieties Desiree, International Kidney and Majestic.

Also for next season I am going to have a go at growing an older variety tomato, I read and hear that trying to grow tomatoes on the allotment is doomed to failure but I am always up for a challenge. At the time of writing I have almost finished my winter digging, a task that I find very therapeutic because I seem to be getting a head start on the weeds. Pre growing season I have a sense of anticipation of what is going to be grown and where, and the structures I will need to build to support them. A trellis for the runner beans, I acquired some lightweight reinforcing steel for my peas, and I also purchased a couple of garden arches in the winter sale that I will use, I haven't made up my mind yet how I am going to use them.

One of the high points of last season for me was harvesting carrots and cooking them within 20 minutes of coming out the ground, that is a magical taste.

It may seem obvious, but just grow what you want to eat, if you don't like it don't grow it!

And if you are a new allotment holder go forward with no fear, nature will give you direction.

Clive Collins -Radburn Allotments





# Frequent Questions

## What do I do with my allotment waste?

Composting is the best way to dispose of those sprout stalks, carrot tops and the remains of your old crop! It is environmentally friendly, helps recycle waste, and provides **free** garden compost.

Burning is **not** environmentally friendly. It is harmful to health, and can be annoying to other allotment holders or neighbouring households. If you continually cause a nuisance with burning, you can be prosecuted by the Environmental Health Department.

## What can I compost?

If it can rot it will compost, but some items are best avoided. Some things, like grass mowings and soft young weeds, rot quickly. They work as 'activators' or 'hotter rotters', getting the composting started, but on their own will decay to a smelly mess. Older and tougher plant material is slower to rot but gives body to the finished compost -and usually makes up the bulk of a compost heap. Woody items decay very slowly; they are best chopped or shredded first, where appropriate. For best results, use a mixture of types of ingredient. The right balance is something you learn by experience.

### **Hotter rotters (activators)**

- Comfrey leaves
- Young weeds
- Grass cuttings
- Chicken manure
- Pigeon manure

### **Other compostable items**

- Wood ash
- Paper towels & bags
- Egg boxes

### **Slow Cookers – very slow to rot**

- Autumn leaves
- Tough hedge clippings
- Woody prunings
- Sawdust
- Wood shavings

### **Best Avoided**

- Meat
- Fish
- Newspaper
- Cooked food

### **A balanced diet**

- Fruit & Vegetable scraps
- Tea bags
- Coffee grounds
- Old flowers
- Bedding plants
- Old straw & hay
- Vegetable plant remains
- Strawy manures
- Young hedge clippings
- Soft prunings
- Perennial weeds
- Gerbil, hamster, rabbit bedding

### **DO NOT COMPOST**

- Coal & coke ash
- Cat litter
- Dogfaeces
- Disposable nappies
- Glossy magazines

When the ingredients you have put in your container have turned into a dark brown, earthy smelling material, the composting process is complete. It is then best left for a month or two to 'mature' before it is used. Don't worry if your compost is not fine and crumbly. Even if it is lumpy, sticky or stringy, with bits of twig and eggshell still obvious, it is quite usable.

### **Perennial weeds**

Some perennial weeds will be killed in a hot heap; avoid really persistent horrors such as

celandine, bulbous buttercup, ground elder and bindweed. Don't burn or dump these weeds -they are rich in plant foods. Mix with grass mowings in a plastic sack. Tie it up and leave for a few months until the weeds are no longer recognisable, then add to the compost heap.

### **Weed seeds**

Weed seeds may survive a cool heap, but should be killed in a hot one. If your compost tends to grow weeds, dig it in rather than spreading it on the soil surface.

### **How can I help to save water?**

- Use water butts to collect rainwater
- Do not use sprinklers or leave hoses running
- Report any leaks on allotment sites to NHDC tel. 01462 474000
- Add organic matter to soil
- Water less frequently but thoroughly to encourage deep roots
- Water late in the day
- Water directly around the roots

### **Why is the plot next to mine so overgrown? It must be vacant.**

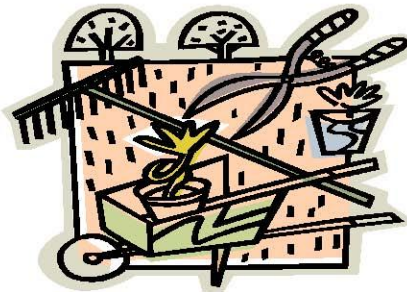
At any one time, about 5% of occupied plots are uncultivated. This can be due to illness, family incidents or simply loss of interest. Uncultivated plots are a nuisance to neighbouring ploholders and most unfair to persons waiting for a an allotment (sometimes for years). For this reason cultivation checks are made throughout the year and non-performers are contacted. Non-cultivation can lead to eviction from the plot and this happened to some 35 ploholders in 2010. Refunds on rents are not given in cases of Eviction.

## Vandalism & anti-social behaviour

Unfortunately, all North Hertfordshire District Council's allotment sites suffer anti-social behaviour, damage and theft from time to time. In 2009, Hertfordshire Police through the Safer Communities programme launched Allotment Watch. This gives members security advice and updates on incidents. A roadshow also visited a number of sites offering advice and security items.



# ALLOTMENT WATCH



**If you are interested in joining Allotment Watch  
then please contact tel: 01438 757730**



If you do suffer damage to your property please inform the Police on 101 and North Hertfordshire District Council on tel. 01462 474000.

**North Hertfordshire District Council  
Allotment Administration**

***I wish to report my change of address, my new address is –***

Signed..... Print Name.....

Site.....Plot No. ....Date.....

*Please return to Allotment Administration, Customer Services Directorate, North Hertfordshire District Council, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City, Herts SG6 3JF*

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**North Hertfordshire District Council  
Allotment Administration**

***I wish to give up my plot***

Signed..... Print Name.....

Site.....Plot No. ....Date.....

Please return to Allotment Administration, Customer Services Directorate, North Hertfordshire District Council, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City, Herts SG6 3JF