



South Dublin Allotments Association

Preparing and Setting Out New Allotments

Factsheet No. 3

Some basic ideas on preparing and setting out new allotments to help you get started on your plot.

Getting Started

Firstly, if there is a lot of grass and weed growth on your plot to start off, then the best thing is to trim this down as much as possible. This can be done with a petrol strimmer, preferably one with a metal blade, or a scythe. Strimmers can be hired from equipment hire companies. The cuttings can be raked off and composted.

If you do not want to tackle the whole plot at once, grass and weeds can be killed off gradually by laying down sheets of weed suppressing material (available at local garden centres and DIY stores), or old carpets or sheets of cardboard weighted down with stones.

Layout Styles

It is useful to read up about the different styles of layout in advance. There are a lot of good books, websites and magazines available now which provide plenty of advice. At the same time, learning by doing can be the best way to figure out what works best for you.

Having permanent beds with fixed paths in between is easier to manage than digging a whole plot. Designated paths means beds are not compacted from being walked on and good soil structure is maintained. Digging the whole plot means more area is under cultivation and less is used for paths. With the whole plot dug there is less worry about maintaining bed boundaries, especially when using a rotovator. It can also be easier to manage a crop rotation system as there is more flexibility of space.

Site Considerations

In planning the layout of your cultivation you need to take into account the characteristics of your site. If it slopes then try to avoid planting in rows running down the slope, as this encourages loss of soil downwards. Ideally rows need to be aligned north-south to get maximum sun light to all the plants, or as near to this orientation as possible.

If the soil is a very heavy clay type, then adding lots of compost will help loosen it up. If it holds the water a lot then the best arrangement may be to construct raised beds in some form, with or without boards. Even adding a little sand can help.

If local knowledge cannot inform you of the soil type, then get a soil testing kit from a garden centre or DIY store. This will tell you the pH of the soil, whether the soil is very acidic or alkaline. Most crops do not like too much of either, but prefer a happy

medium. Most soils can be balanced by regular addition of good well-rotted compost, usually in Autumn.

Layout Design

In planning your layout you will need to take into account the principles of crop rotation described further on. Mainly this is in terms of deciding if you are going to grow large amounts of potatoes or not, because if so, then you may need to allocate more space for potatoes. In the following year then the extra space that might not be filled by the appropriate follow-on crops may need to be planted with something neutral that doesn't fall into one of the five rotation groups.

Draw up a plan of your site using graph paper, counting each square as a metre or half metre as fits best. Divide it up as needed for the different plant groups, with a double-sized area for potatoes if desired. If you have a spare section it can be left fallow for a year if necessary – green manure can be grown on it or it can be a wild life patch with native flowers. Just be careful to dead-head any windblown seed heads before they go to seed, e.g. dandelions and thistles.

If it is your first time cultivating an allotment site then it is a good idea not to do the whole plot without paths and separate beds, especially if there are not many in your household to help dig or eat the produce. It is easier to get yourself into the cultivation gradually by digging small beds of about 1.2-1.4 metres across and about 4 metres long, which you can reach from the edge and not compact the soil by stepping on it. These can be mounded up a bit to help with drainage. They can be further enhanced by making them into full-scale raised beds with planks of wood surrounding them. This is a bit of work to get in place but once done keeps things very neat and manageable. Some advantages can be that the soil warms up a bit more quickly in Spring, there is better drainage and fewer slugs, and it can be easier to protect beds against other pests with netting etc. Both mounded and raised beds also reduce back bending which is always a plus.

Paths in between can be about 0.6 metre wide and can be surfaced in various ways. Grass looks nice but needs cutting and gets mucky in the wet. Bark mulch is good, though needs topping up every so often. It can be supported by putting down a weed barrier material first, either a commercial variety or old carpets can do the job. Planks of wood, paving slabs and stones can all serve the purpose too, though again a weed barrier material would probably be needed underneath.

What to Plant

In studying what crops you would like to grow, take into consideration the amount of time you have to visit your site to look after those plants. For example, potatoes do not need a lot of attention, except for that urgent anti-blight spraying at the beginning of June if it's warm and wet (listen to the radio for blight warnings). Onions are fairly easy too once the weeds are kept at bay. Tomatoes can need watering daily if there is a dry spell and one missed watering can cause irreparable damage. If you are a first-timer try not to plant too many different crops in the first year, as getting used to their different maintenance needs can take time and experience. Start with a few basic varieties and then add more each year as you get more confident and your plot gets more fully cultivated. Read a good book on food growing and talk to fellow allotmenters.

Crop Rotation

Crop rotation ensures that the same crops are not grown on the same piece of soil two or more years running. This is to prevent over-usage of certain nutrients by particular plant groups on the same area and build-up of diseases associated with particular plant groups.

The first step is to list all the plants, vegetables, fruit and herbs you want on the plot. Please note that this will not be a finite list but can be changed in subsequent years. This list will at least indicate the approximate sizes for each type of plant and which ones require a fixed or rotation position. For example:

Fixed Plants

Hard Fruit – Apples, Pears, Plums

Soft Fruit – Raspberries, Gooseberries, Blackcurrants, Red Currants, Blackberries, Strawberries, Rhubarb

Herbs – Basil, Oregano, Rosemary, Mint, Thyme, Chives, Parsley

Rotation Vegetables

Brassicas: Cabbage, cauliflower, radish, swede (sh), Beetroot, Radish (sh), Broccoli

Legumes: Pea, bean (broad, French and runner)

Alliums: Onion (sh), garlic, shallot, leek

Potato family: Potato, tomato

Umbellifers: Carrot, parsnip, parsley, celery (sh), Florence fennel

Adaptable plants that can go anywhere: Lettuce (sh), spinach (sh), kale (sh), aubergines, courgettes, marrows, peppers, pumpkins, squashes, sweet corn

The vegetables that are shade tolerant to some degree are marked (sh), which may help when trying to plant taller vegetables beside shorter ones.

Allow space for a compost area, paths and a seating area if desired.

So, to have a minimum three year rotation, and to have double the area for potatoes as for any other vegetable group, six areas or beds of similar size would be needed to cater for the five plant groups, besides any area set aside for permanent plants. Not every bed would have to be completely filled with the one vegetable type. Plants from the adaptable list can be put anywhere to fill gaps where not needed by other vegetables. A very simplified example of how to organize a rotation would be as follows:

Bed 1	Bed 2	Bed 3	Bed 4	Bed 5	Bed 6
Year 1 – Legumes	Year 1 – Alliums	Year 1 – Potatoes	Year 1 – Potatoes	Year 1 – Umbellifers	Year 1 – Brassicas
Year 2 – Potatoes	Year 2 – Potatoes	Year 2 – Umbellifers	Year 2 – Brassicas	Year 2 – Legumes	Year 2 – Alliums
Year 3 – Umbellifers	Year 3 – Brassicas	Year 3 – Legumes	Year 3 – Alliums	Year 3 – Potatoes	Year 3 – Potatoes

Compost

One way to return goodness to the soil is to make compost on the allotment using all the surplus green matter from harvested crops, supplemented if wanted with a

percentage of paper and cardboard, household waste etc. Manure is really good though some vegetables don't like it recently added. Peat is considered to be unacceptable environmentally, and it doesn't have any nutrient value. Peat-free compost is quite readily available in many of the garden and DIY centres. If fertilizer is used it should be appropriate for the crop in question and it should be used where required rather than broadcast generally over the plot. Instructions on the packet or container will advise suitable use, as will a good vegetable growing book or magazine.

Wildlife

Consider encouraging wildlife of the non-furry kind onto your plot. Growing flowers among the vegetables will have a wonderful effect on productivity, as the bees, moths, flies and insects generally will be attracted to the colour and scent and will stay to fertilize the vegetables or prey on unwanted creatures. Pest species of insects will be confused by the scent of flowers and herbs and will be less likely to damage precious crops. An abundance of insects will attract more birds who will feed on them and on other pests such as slugs. Flowers add some colour and cheer to a plot, as most vegetables fall into the forty shades of green category. Some, such as sunflowers and teasel, have the added benefit of helping to feed birds through the winter, thus keeping pest control allies on your side.

Boundary Treatment

The boundary of your plot needs to be designed to meet certain requirements. There may already be some form of fence already in place, such as posts and wire. If your site is quite exposed and windy you may wish to add some fine plastic mesh to reduce the wind. If there is a risk of rabbits you may need to add some chicken wire, with the bottom 10cm or so buried beneath the surface. Unless you cultivate right up to the edge you may need to put some kind of weed suppressing material in place, such as bark mulch or weed barrier material as for paths above.

A Final Word

Don't be put off by failures. Each year that a plot is worked, new skills and knowledge are gained. Double-check if seed packet instructions were followed precisely or if weather conditions matched those required of the plant. Try different varieties of particular vegetables in case they are better suited to the conditions on the ground. If this still doesn't work then maybe that vegetable will not work on your site so try something completely different. Above all, do not try to do too much at once but develop your plot gradually, over several years if necessary.

Disclaimer

The information presented here is intended as a basic guide only and is not intended by the South Dublin Allotments Association to be fully comprehensive. The guidance given here is not necessarily endorsed by South Dublin County Council. People with a medical condition are usually advised to consult their physician before undertaking any strenuous exercise.