

Project allotment

A guide to growing together on allotments

Who is this guide written for?

- Voluntary and community groups e.g. food growing groups from the Transition network who are planning to rent a plot/s on an allotment site.
- Staff from voluntary agencies co-ordinating the rental of allotment plots on which to run educational or therapeutic growing projects e.g. MIND, refugee support groups.
- Allotment associations and plotheolders who would like to work together to deliver a project that would benefit their site.



What is an allotment?

An allotment plot is a piece of land, leased either from a private or local authority landlord, for growing fruit and vegetables for personal and family use. The current standard plot size is 250 sq metres and an allotment site may contain as little as 6 or hundreds of plots, although plot sizes have grown smaller as demand for plots has grown.

Traditionally individuals have cultivated allotments, with some input from friends or family but, as recognised by the DCLG guide, 'Space for Food Growing' (available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/space-for-food-growing-a-guide), new users have now come on the scene - from food growing collectives to therapeutic and educational schemes. These include day centres for people with special needs, refugee projects, college training schemes and youth groups.

These users offer activities and resources beyond the scope of the conventional allotment and may also play a role in regenerating sites, especially in areas where uptake of allotments by individuals is still low.

Community projects can attract grant funding to provide facilities accessible by all plotholders.

Some local authorities encourage community use of allotments. These authorities consider that doing so brings the benefit of allotment gardening to a wider selection of people and can help achieve some of the authority's other objectives in terms of supporting the health and well-being of their communities.

Allotment sites have a particular culture and rules restricting activities which can take place on site (some of which is enshrined in Allotment Law). For a group to work successfully on site it is important that these are taken into consideration.

How to find an allotment plot for your group

How allotment sites are organised

Most (but by no means all) allotment sites are owned by a local authority (the district, borough, town or parish council). The point of contact at the authority will be the allotments or parks officer (clerk or technical assistant for smaller councils).

Many allotment sites (including those owned by a local authority) will have an association or society run by a committee and/or a site representative. Contact details can be obtained from the local authority, site notice board or by asking a plotholder on site. Sites may be managed solely by the local authority, the association or somewhere in between.

There are three types of allotment site:

Statutory allotments

Statutory allotments are parcels of land acquired by the local authority specifically for use as allotments.

These statutory sites cannot be sold or used for other purposes without the consent of the Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

Information on what allotment authorities must demonstrate in order to show an allotment site is not needed and can be disposed of is available in DCLG guidance at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/allotment-disposal-guidance-safeguards-and-alternatives

Temporary allotments

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 as statutory allotments. For temporary allotments, normal planning procedures apply if the allotment authority wishes to change the use to which the land is put.

Privately owned allotments

Privately owned land can also be let for use as allotments. These private plots have the same legal status as temporary allotments. The local authority has no control over them but normal planning procedures apply if the owner wishes to change the use to which the land is put.

Plots on a statutory allotment site

Statutory allotments are let under a tenancy agreement to persons resident in the authority's area for growing fruit and vegetables for personal and family use.

However, section 27(5) of the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 ('The Act') provides for the temporary use of statutory allotment land by any person if it cannot be let as an allotment under s23(1) of the Act.

Allotments are now in very high demand in many areas, with long waiting lists. In these cases, it is unlikely your group will be offered a plot. In such circumstances, if groups are allowed to use a plot then this may undermine the statutory protection of that site and leave it vulnerable to development for other uses.



Where plots on a site are available for temporary use, for example neglected or hard to let plots that would overwhelm an individual, the allotments authority may be willing to let one (or more) to your group. In such circumstances there are various options for the legal agreement that can be put in place (see below).

Plots on temporary or private sites

Temporary and private sites do not have the same limits on their use as statutory allotments do. The allotment site manager is free to grant plots to either individuals or groups.

The tenancy agreement

A traditional allotment tenancy agreement is the 'contract' set up between the plot tenant and the allotment authority. Plots are normally leased for a period of one year.

Legally the tenancy agreement can only be made out to an individual, usually the project leader, who will be legally responsible for members of the group and visitors.

If your group is offered a traditional allotment tenancy agreement on these terms, you should avoid a project structure that looks like sub-letting, eg a loose knit group that gives individuals small plots and charges for them.

Activities that can be carried out on an allotment are restricted by the tenancy agreement and any associated rules. The tenancy agreement and rules are written by the local authority or, if the site is self-managed, the committee, and vary from site to site. Plotters can be evicted if they breach the tenancy agreement.

Many agreements/rules do not permit:

- the planting of trees or perennials
- the creation of ponds or erection of sheds
- the sale of produce
- livestock.

There will also be rules about keeping the plot free from weeds and what percentage must be in cultivation.

It is important that the group leader communicates the terms and conditions that accompany the tenancy agreement to all members of the group and that any project plans adhere to these rules.

Other types of agreement might be more appropriate to your group. The Community Land Advice Service (CLAS) has further information about the different options, including a flowchart 'Which is the right type of land agreement for you?' See *Resources*.

How to make it work

- Inform your group about good allotment practice, eg don't wash tools in the water butt. Make sure they know about the site rules.
- Talk to other plotters, introduce yourselves and tell them about your project but do respect other people's plots. Your group can benefit from the accumulated wisdom of other plotters who may have been gardening on site for a long time and have lots of tips to share.
- Post up contact details of the project on the plot so that other plotters know who to contact if a problem arises.



- Nominate a key holder(s) and do not allow the site key to be copied amongst the group. Ensure the site rep and other plotters know who the nominated key-holder(s) are. Other members of the group or visitors to the project should be accompanied by a nominated key holder.
- Encourage all members of your group to join the allotment association if there is one and to join in with the allotment community and contribute to any communal activities.
- Do not take on more plots than the group can realistically cope with or you will rapidly lose credibility. Untended weed-strewn plots can bring resentment from tidy plotters. A full size plot can be a considerable commitment for even several people. You can always rent more plots once you have got the first one established.
- Carry out any building works gradually where possible. Many plotters go to the allotment for peace and quiet, so noise, pollution and disruption are not going to be welcome.
- Do not leave expensive tools and equipment lying around;



this could attract thieves and vandalism. Lock them away in a shed or bring them to the site for each session.

Practicalities to consider before you start

- Insurance will be necessary. On direct-let sites the authority only insures communal areas and you will need public liability for your plot. If the site has an association they should have insurance and you will need to check that it covers the activities that you plan.
- Will you need a toilet? If there isn't one on or near the site, get permission to hire a chemical toilet or consider building a compost toilet.
- Will you need to provide transport for your group? Is there adequate parking and access to the plot at the site?
- Have you allowed for meal times and provided drink facilities? There may not be drinking water on site.
- If there is nowhere to shelter in bad weather or store your tools, get permission to erect a shed, polytunnel or shipping container.
- Make sure participants come to the allotment in suitable outdoor gear. It may be necessary to provide wellies,

waterproofs and even 'charity shop' jumpers/coats in case of sudden weather changes.

- If the group only visits the plot every few days, you will need to think who will come and water the plot in dry spells and do security checks.
- How will you attract new people to the group if people drop out?

For more ideas see *Tips from projects* on the following pages.

Gardening expertise

Detailed gardening advice is outside the scope of this factsheet but gardening expertise is obviously an important part of your project! Here are a few tips and resources to help you find the information you will need.

- Persistent perennial weeds are often more of a problem on an allotment than in the average garden. A good strategy is to cover the majority of the plot with a weed suppressing mulch and peel this back as you are ready to cultivate each section.
- Membership of Garden Organic includes a range of gardening factsheets, a 'Starting an allotment' leaflet, visits to demonstration organic gardens and talks on allotments.
- Consider taking out a subscription to the monthly magazine *Kitchen Garden* which provides month-by-month food growing advice relevant to allotments.
- Build up a library of gardening books, such as 'The New Vegetable and Herb Expert', 'Successful Allotments' and 'The Organic Bible' (see *Resources*).
- Attend a gardening course at your local college or arrange gardening training courses on your allotment.

Have an exit plan

Even the most well run project may eventually end if funding runs out or the original need for the project has been met. At the start of the project agree with the allotment officer or Allotment Association what will happen if or when the project ends. It is important for the benefit of other plot-holders and reputation of future allotment projects that you finish up properly:

- Terminate your tenancy before the plot is overgrown. This means the plot can be easily re-let.
- Return all the keys. Replacing lost keys is a big expense for authorities and a security risk. If you have planted perennials such as rhubarb and raspberries agree what can be left behind and what must be removed.
- Remove all materials such as wood, rubbish and bags of compost.

Tips from projects

Plot design and equipment

Rotherham Primary Care Trust

- Bought a cheap metal shed for storage but it was too flimsy. Secured a grant and planning permission for a second-hand shipping container which is very secure.
- Two polytunnels - good for working undercover in bad weather and for growing a wider range of plants. Tables for seed planting work. This does require more volunteers for the extra watering involved. Ventilation was not adequate for tomatoes (fungus) so have purchased a greenhouse too.
- Compost bins were donated. A local contractor brings leaves and green waste.

Garden of Easton, Bristol

- No seed propagation area so created a hot bed instead. For information on hot bed construction visit: www.holon.se/garden/howto/hotbed_en.shtml or <http://jackfirst.co.uk>
- Built a 'wattle and daub' all-weather shelter with help from the local school. The shelter is also used for green woodworking workshops.
- Built a compost toilet for £50 using all reclaimed materials and voluntary labour.
- No water on site and too expensive to install. Set up a rainwater collection system using recycled plastic butts and run-off from neighbouring garage roof.

Groundwork East Durham

- Polytunnels got badly wind-damaged and were difficult to fix. Not suitable for sites exposed to a north east wind.
- Installing a greenhouse attracted lots of new volunteers as they now had a warm, indoor space to work.
- Rotavators and strimmers were a waste of money. Noisy and heavy. Not so suitable for projects for elderly women, children or less mobile people.
- Raised beds did not attract wheelchair users but are popular with the school groups – sense of ownership, easier to work, manageable size so less daunting.
- Plot design included a campfire area for tea drinking which has proved very popular.

TCV Northamptonshire

- Range of attractive raised beds of different heights making them suitable for a range of users.

Lancashire Wildlife Trust

- Don't buy too many tools to start with, as you won't know

what you need until you get going. Buy basic tools first then build up stocks as they become necessary.

Keeping it going

Teeside Homeless Action

- Watering has been a big problem in summer. By working hard to attract and encourage volunteers they have now solved the problem.
- Found that providing a wide range of activities maintained volunteer interest.
- Providing both a garden and food growing areas meant that people could learn about flower beds and amenity gardening as well as vegetable growing, fruit and composting.
- Training in horticultural skills and crafts has proved popular, e.g. hurdle fencing.

Rotherham Primary Care Trust

- Had some 'fair weather gardeners' who disappeared in winter.
- Found social events brought in new people – barbecue, fun day, park rangers running workshops in bat and bird box-building, bouncy castle, seed planting, apple day events.
- Looking at the possibility of setting up accredited training courses on site.

TCV Northamptonshire

- Involve a number of school groups but it has been difficult to get the children to come outside of the school sessions. Turnover of teachers is a problem - some are keen about bringing children, others are too nervous.
- Some volunteers come as part of the work experience they are doing with the local park.
- Have found the other ploholders very valuable for information exchange.

Garden of Easton, Bristol

- Have used site for workshops in practical skills such as building a hot bed or pond. Participants learn new skills and want to come back to see how their handiwork develops.
- At first they involved lots of different groups which proved to be high maintenance as it was too difficult to meet the demands of all the groups, so they just concentrate on a few groups now.
- Giving volunteers responsibility and decision-making powers leads to ownership and responsibility, which in turn leads to commitment.

Groundwork East Durham

- Trying to cover the summer watering was difficult causing



divisions between different groups in the project which put people off. If you do not have enough people for summer watering, opt for less 'thirsty' summer crops.

- Offered health-led incentives to participants, e.g. free pass to leisure centres, day trips to botanic gardens.

Lancashire Wildlife Trust

- Don't get flustered if projects go up and down. Communities change and people change, accept change and don't try and force it.
- Be welcoming so that new people come in. Don't ask big commitments from people: have a fixed day of the week when people can drop in and help for a couple of hours.
- Run the project like an outdoor community centre – lots of tea and biscuits. The social element is important.
- Aim to cater for all skills and talents, providing tasks for both experts and novices.
- A core of 8-10 dedicated people is enough. You don't need a big group. Expand to 20 and the group dynamics get too complicated. Members of smaller groups tend to take on more responsibility and it's easier to keep track of who's doing what.



**Federation of
City Farms
& Community
Gardens**

Resources

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG)

Supports, represents and promotes community-managed farms and gardens across the UK.

Additional relevant publications include 'Allotments law and community growing'.

Tel. (0117) 923 1800
admin@farmgarden.org.uk
www.farmgarden.org.uk

National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG)

The national representative body for the allotment movement in the UK.

Tel. (01536) 266 576
natsoc@nsalg.org.uk
www.nsalg.org.uk

Community Land Advice Service

Tel. (0117) 966 9491
england@communitylandadvice.org.uk
www.communitylandadvice.org.uk

Allotments Regeneration Initiative (ARI)

ARI supported allotments regeneration from 2002-2012. Although the project has now ended, the website still contains a large number of useful publications and other resources.

www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari

Garden Organic (formerly HDRA)

Organic gardening. Network of local groups. Publications and advice.

Tel. (0247) 630 3517
enquiry@gardenorganic.org.uk
www.gardenorganic.org.uk

UK office: The GreenHouse, Hereford Street, Bristol BS3 4NA
Tel: 0117 923 1800 admin@farmgarden.org.uk

www.farmgarden.org.uk

Thrive

Network of therapeutic gardening projects, many on allotments. Publications include building raised beds and garden design for gardeners with special needs.

Tel: (0118) 988 5688
info@thrive.org.uk
www.thrive.org.uk

Community Composting Network (CCN)

Starter pack for community composting schemes.

Tel: (0114) 258 0483
ccn@gn.apc.org
www.communitycompost.org

Trust for Conservation Volunteers (TCV)

Publications on various topics including tree planting and hedging, risk assessments and tool care.

Tel: (0149) 182 1600
information@tcv.org.uk
www.btcv.org

Useful publications

Kitchen Garden magazine

www.kitchengarden.co.uk

The New Vegetable and Herb Expert

Good vegetable growing book for beginners.

ISBN: 0-903-50546-0

Green Essentials Organic Guides - 'Successful allotments'

A little full colour booklet on starting an allotment. Price £3.
www.impactpublishing.co.uk

The Organic Bible by Bob Flowerdew

ISBN: 1-856-26595-1