

EDEN ALLOTMENT GARDENS

YOUR GUIDE TO GOOD ALLOTMENT USE



FORWARD

As Mayor of Carrickfergus I would like to warmly welcome you as a new tenant with Carrickfergus Borough Council's Allotment Service. I hope that you find the information that we have provided in this guide useful both now and in the future.

Allotment gardening can provide a number of benefits to individuals, such as the opportunity to produce a wide range of relatively inexpensive healthy vegetables, whilst at the same time providing physical exercise in the outdoors. It can create the opportunity to make new friends and provide the chance to socialise with others who enjoy a similar rewarding pastime.

Allotments can provide a great sense of well-being and give pleasure and satisfaction to people who through their own skills and effort produce their own food and of course in addition allotments are also beneficial to the environment and wildlife generally.

Carrickfergus Borough Council is committed to improving the quality of life for all the residents through the services it provides including the allotment service. Our aim is to build on the good practices and positive improvements which have already occurred at Eden Allotment Gardens by further working in partnerships with the Allotment Holders Association, individuals and government agencies in order to provide accessible well managed allotment gardens.

This booklet gives advice about good allotment use in accordance with conditions set out in your tenancy agreement. Good gardening.

Alderman Patricia McKinney
Mayor of Carrickfergus

TIPS FOR GOOD GARDENING

You'll find this guide is packed with good advice about allotment gardening, from digging the plot to planning year-round use. Adopt the good practice set out here and you should find the experience of managing your plot both enjoyable and rewarding.

This guide isn't a comprehensive manual, and can't answer all your gardening queries. But there's plenty of help available: the Borough's libraries have a great selection of gardening books; the internet is host to lots of useful information (see www.carrickfergusinbloom.org for local information); local gardening societies can provide advice and your fellow plot-holders will often be able to help also.

Don't rush – if you try to do too much too quickly, your tasks will become burdens. Instead, do a little and often. See '*Preparing the Plot*' within this booklet for ideas on getting your allotment into shape.

Plant wisely – don't be tempted to rush out on the first sunny day, instead identify varieties that grow well in your area. See '*What to Grow*' within this booklet for some advice on selecting suitable varieties for your soil, and '*How Much Time*' within this booklet to get an idea of what time you'll need to put aside throughout the year.

Going Organic – gardening organically can be a very rewarding exercise. See the '*Going Organic*' section within this booklet for some advice on why you might want to stop using chemicals.

Be Water Wise – Water at the allotments is not free, 'Northern Ireland Water' charge the Council to use it. Being water wise is the responsibility of all allotment holders. See '*Being Water Wise*' within this booklet for some ideas on saving water.

Protect the soil – if you take care of your soil, you'll have less watering, weeding and digging to do. If you prepare the soil as recommended within the '*Mulching*' section of this booklet you will help to keep your soil in top condition.

Make compost – what starts off as waste soon becomes an asset, improving soil, feeding your plants and reducing rubbish. See '*Composting*' within this booklet for a guide on how to build and

maintain a compost pile.

Rotate your crops – the three trials to a gardener are the weather, pests and diseases. There's not a lot you can do about the weather, but crop rotation will limit the damage caused by soil-borne pests and diseases. See '*Crop Rotation*' within this booklet for guidance.

Use the plot year-round - you'll have a better selection of food for longer, and it will be easier to keep on top of things. See '*Year-Round Gardening*' within this booklet for some advice on what to plant.

Be a good neighbour – consider your fellow gardeners and neighbours as well as thinking of what to grow and how to grow it. See '*Be a good neighbour*' within this booklet for some simple examples of being a good neighbour.

Enjoy it – allotment gardening is a delightful, social activity that brings an understanding of nature and an abundance of fruit and vegetables with a freshness and flavour unrivalled in the shops. Regard it as a delight and a privilege to have an allotment, not a chore!

PREPARING THE PLOT

Good preparation will make all your tasks easier, and this is particularly true when it comes to laying out the plot and preparing the soil. After all, two key objectives are to make life easy for yourself and the soil good for your plants. You might take over a plot that requires no work, having been left perfect by the departing tenant. More likely, it will be covered in perennial weeds. This isn't so bad, as a blank canvas allows you to decide how your plot will be laid out.

The first thing to do is to make a plan of the plot, include in the design those features that you want. It's handy to have four similarly-sized areas to help plan crop rotation, plus areas for permanent plantings of fruit trees, soft fruit and vegetables such as asparagus and artichokes. You'll need paths 500mm (19") wide, a compost area of at least 2x1m (2x1 yards) for two compost bins. You may also wish to construct a shed, greenhouse or cold frame. However, you will need permission from Council to erect a structure, such as a shed.

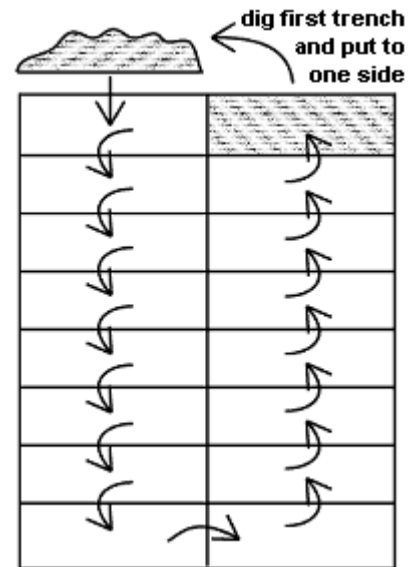
You want to avoid walking on beds whenever possible (which greatly reduces the amount of digging required later on), so have sufficient paths to allow you to reach the middle of each bed

without stepping on it - perhaps 1.5m (5') between the paths. You should also consider including an area to encourage pollinators and pest controllers (ladybirds!) onto your plot.

Start the work by cutting back any vegetation as close to the ground as you can (a strimmer will be useful), mark out the areas for beds, paths, compost bins and other features with pegs and string, roughen up the soil where the compost heap will be made, and get digging the beds - but don't loosen the soil where the shed, greenhouse or paths will be.

Double digging is what nearly all the books recommend. It takes longer, but done properly it might be the last time for many years you use a spade other than to lift crops! The purpose is to loosen the subsoil for improved drainage and easier root penetration, without mixing it with the humus-rich topsoil.

Starting at one end of the bed, dig out a trench of soil the depth and width of the spade, and pile up the soil just beyond the far end of the bed, removing weeds and piling them on the compost heap. Always remove as much soil as you can from the roots of weeds, as this will speed up composting. Use a fork to loosen the soil at the base of the trench thoroughly. Working in some horticultural grit and compost to help open up the soil for good drainage.



Dig a second trench right up against the first, weeding and moving the top layer of soil onto the loosened soil in the first trench, and again loosen the sub-soil below. Work across the bed repeating this process, until you get to the far end. Here, you can rake the soil you removed from the first trench into the final trench. Following this procedure ensures that you have the least amount of carrying to do, leaving your strength to get on with digging the next bed! The surface of the bed will probably have been lifted up by around 20cm (8") and the soil will be very soft, ideal for most plants. Don't walk on it or it will compress back to what you started with; this is why you have more paths than you think you need.

Most plants prefer a neutral soil and an overly acid or alkaline soil will not release nutrients to your plants. If you are able, test the soil acidity (pH meters are quite inexpensive, and you may

be able to borrow one). If the soil is too alkaline (7.5 or above on the pH scale), an application of ammonium sulphate will help bring the soil back into balance. Most likely, the soil will be too acid (6 or lower on the pH scale) and this can be corrected by an application of ground lime. When using either of these materials, avoid using any chemicals or manure, or sowing any seeds for at least two weeks.

Two or three weeks before planting, add a general fertilizer to the soil. Blood, Fish and Bone is a good general purpose NPK slow-release fertilizer. (NPK refers to the three primary nutrients used by plants: nitrogen (N) promotes leaf growth, phosphorus (P) promotes root development and potassium (K) promotes flower and seed production.) As a general guide, a top dressing of 50g (2oz) per square metre (yard) is ideal, but remember that too much fertilizer is bad for plants, so don't overdo it and always read the manufacturer's instructions.

Digging over a plot will expose many weed seeds, and these will start growing immediately, whatever the season. Whilst a good mulch will stifle many weeds, many more will get through. Don't worry, as they will be easy to pull out if you have dug the soil properly. Be sure to tackle them, by hand or with a hoe, before planting seeds.

WHAT TO GROW

Pretty well all of the vegetable and herb seeds you find in garden centres can be grown in Carrickfergus's climate, although some plants may require a greenhouse, at least until June. The best practice is to follow the instructions on the packet, which will be fine (even cautious) for this area. Plants bought from the garden centre in spring will often have been given favourable treatment to bring them on, so acclimatize these before planting out.

Soil varies across the allotment area although most is heavy clay. Some vegetable and fruit varieties will do better on one type of soil or another and, within these varieties, some plants will be more successful than others. Learn about your soil (that sounds obvious, but it will take you the full range of seasons to fully understand it) and adapt your planting to suit. If there isn't a variety of carrot that will stand your heavy clay, either forget carrots and plant beetroot instead, or build a raised bed filled with lighter soil. Experience will tell you what grows well on your plot, and you can learn from what others grow on the site.

You can grow many different soft and top fruits, though some delicate fruits may require a southerly aspect with wind protection. It is best to buy fruit canes, bushes and trees from a reputable dealer who can guarantee virus-free stock.

An allotment is not just about vegetables and fruit; plenty of gardeners grow flowers, too. Flowers can help increase your overall yield by improving pollination, and will give you and your neighbours great pleasure.

Whatever you choose to grow, don't be put off by a crop failure - this happens to us all from time to time, and the reasons are often beyond our control. Whatever the cause, it is not a cause for embarrassment!

HOW MUCH TIME?

Many gardeners fail to appreciate the amount of time required to keep an allotment in good shape. Starting late in spring with all the basic work (soil preparation, weeding) to do and all the crops to sow, they have difficulty in keeping up. The best idea is to start preparing the plot for the coming year in autumn, doing a little digging each weekend (perhaps an hour or so) so that the plot is ready for planting in spring. Of course, if you've just taken on an overgrown plot you may need to put twice that time in just to get it ready in time for the early crops.

There will be a few crops to plant in February and March, but the bulk of the planting takes place in April and May. You'll gradually increase the amount of time spent on the plot and, by the time summer comes, you may be spending more hours per week watering, weeding and tending your plants. Most gardeners will put in a lot of this time at weekends, but the best advice is to spare a couple of hours each morning or evening – then you'll spot any problems that much earlier and these are better times to water (and easier times to work) than at the height of the day.

If you plan and plant a year-round allotment, you'll find it easier to keep on top of maintenance and any digging and winter weeding that is required, simply because you're visiting the plot regularly. An hour spent rooting out perennial weeds in autumn can save a day getting to grips with the same weeds in spring.

The advice here will help reduce the amount of work required, but the best advice is to make

your visits to the allotment a pleasure rather than a chore – then the time will fly by!

GOING ORGANIC

Should you, or shouldn't you, garden organically? The reasons why people garden organically are varied. For some it is an ethical consideration – should we risk the potential damage to the environment? For others, the debate centres on health – are the chemicals approved for garden use actually dangerous to us? For many gardeners, it is simply a matter of preferring to work with that which nature has provided.

Many gardeners wonder what exactly organic gardening means. The simple answer is that organic gardeners don't use synthetic fertilizers or pesticides on their plants. But gardening organically is much more than what you don't do. When you garden organically, you think of your plants as part of a whole system within Nature that starts in the soil and includes the water supply, people, wildlife and even insects.

An organic gardener strives to work in harmony with natural systems and to minimize and continually replenish any resources the garden consumes. Organic gardening, then, begins with attention to the soil. You regularly add organic matter to the soil, using locally available resources wherever possible. And everyone has access to the raw ingredients of organic matter, because your lawn, garden and kitchen produce them everyday. Decaying plant wastes, such as grass clippings, fallen leaves and vegetable scraps from your kitchen, are the building blocks of compost, the ideal organic matter for your garden soil.

If you add compost to your soil, you're already well on your way to raising a beautiful, healthy garden organically. The other key to growing organically is to choose plants suited to the site. Plants adapted to the local climate and conditions are better able to grow without a lot of attention or input; on the other hand, when you try to grow a plant that is not right for your site, you will probably have to boost its natural defences to keep it healthy and productive.

Although the Council would like all allotment holders to garden organically we only require allotment holders in Field D to do so. Although exacting organic standards are not specified by Council information on growing organically is available on request or by visiting the Council website at www.edenallotments.co.uk. Allotment holders should also cooperate with the

Council 'Biodiversity Policy' and other environmental policies. For further information visit the Council website www.carrickfergus.org.

BEING WATER WISE

Water at the allotments is not free, 'Northern Ireland Water' charge the Council to use it. Being water wise is the responsibility of all allotment holders. Water is a constant requirement for living plants. It is used to carry nutrients to all parts of the plant and to maintain healthy growth. Excess water is constantly being lost through the plant by transpiration and elsewhere by evaporation. Insufficient water leads to wilting, a loss of growth and eventually the plant's death, so it is important to supply sufficient water to your crops. With these points in mind what is there that you can do as an allotment holder to help conserve water. Below are ten points that may help you to maintain your allotment to a high standard with the minimum amount of water.

1. Use a water butt to collect any rainwater, position it close to your shed so with the use of a length of gutter and a piece of drainpipe water can be collected from the shed roof. It is important to cover the butt to avoid algae growth.
2. Mulch fruit and other long term crops; a good thick layer of mulch helps to conserve water but it also helps prevent weed growth. Well rotted manure, garden compost or straw can be used. From some crops, such as strawberries, it may be appropriate to plant through a layer of black polythene pegged down to the soil. Make sure that the soil is well watered before mulching. See the 'Mulching' section of this booklet for further information.
3. When cultivating your allotment incorporate plenty of organic matter into the soil as this will help retain moisture in the ground.
4. When growing 'hungry' crops, such as beans, sweet peas, etc., dig a good deep trench and fill the bottom with any type of organic matter, even old damp newspaper will do before backfilling. This will help to act as a reservoir for these plants.
5. Grow crops that do not require excess watering, for instance many herbs such as Sage and Rosemary come from Mediterranean climates and can survive fairly dry conditions.

6. If you grow plants in tubs or containers incorporate a water retentive gel into the planting compost. Stand pots, containers and grow bags on trays to catch any water that drains through, this water can then be recycled.
7. When choosing a Watering Can pick one that is well balanced and not too heavy to carry when full, 7 to 9 litres (1½ to 2 gallons) should be about right. Polythene cans are shorter lived than metal ones but are inexpensive and with reasonable care should last for several years. Buy two roses (perforated heads), a fine one for watering seedlings and a coarse one for general purpose watering.
8. When you do water, it is better to pick one section of the allotment and water thoroughly to some depth. A thorough soaking at weekly intervals is much better for the plant than a daily sprinkling of water as this will encourage plants to grow deeper and search for their own water. It is best to water early in the morning, particularly in greenhouses, so plants are surface dry at night. This helps to keep diseases down.
9. If watering has to be curtailed because of a water shortage, the addition of a dilute liquid feed to the water used makes it more of an immediate benefit to the struggling plant and less water will go further.
10. Regular hoeing of cultivated areas not only reduces competition for water from weeds but breaks the soil capillaries and therefore reduces water evaporation from the surface of the soil.

If you take note of these points and are careful with the use of water it will still be possible to grow a wide range of crops through the driest of summers. It is these battles with nature that are amongst the things that makes gardening so enjoyable.

MULCHING

In its natural state our soil is held together by roots, protected from the elements by a canopy of grasses, shrubs and trees, and additional winter protection is provided by the fall of leaves and other plant "waste". This is not so on allotments, where the continuous cycle of planting, harvesting and resting depletes the soil and frequently leaves the surface bare.

And soil does not like to be bare: Wind dries it, forming a thin surface crust through which

seedlings have difficulty penetrating. The heavy clay soil across much of Carrickfergus is prone to sealed dried soil (pancaking), particularly on well-prepared beds. Heavy rain washes much of the goodness out of the soil, and in extreme cases actually washes the soil away. Locally, the rain turns clay into an unyielding, gooey mess that cannot be worked during winter. Walking on the soil compacts it, squeezing out the pockets of air that feed the organisms that in turn keep all our plants alive. Severe compaction prevents drainage, and the resultant waterlogging can damage root systems and stop plants growing altogether. Sunshine quickly evaporates moisture near the surface, adding to plant stress in the summer.

A good surface mulch addresses each of these problems. It prevents the wind drying the surface, it protects the surface from heavy rain, it traps moisture without preventing the sun warming the soil, and a good thick layer can greatly reduce soil compaction by spreading the weight of gardeners' footsteps. It also suppresses annual weeds. In these conditions your plants will be healthier and more resistant to disease and insect attack. And you will have less digging, watering and weeding to do.

Many materials, natural and manufactured, can be used as mulches. For a simple surface cover that will protect the soil from wind, sun and rain and suppress weeds, use old wool carpet (but not rubber-backed) or one of the many woven polypropylene products available from garden centres.

The advantage of this sort of cover is that it can be laid quickly and moved about as required, so it is ideal when you've taken on an overgrown plot or don't have the time to keep up with tasks. It allows water to penetrate, keeping the soil moist and viable. These materials can also be used semi-permanently: simply cut a cross in the material and put the plant you wish to grow through the cut into the soil. The plant will grow and the weeds won't. Eventually the cuts will render the covering useless, but this can take years.

A mulch of straw will provide protection against wind, rain and compaction and, gathered around winter crops, will also afford some frost protection. It is easy to lay and easy to move when you need to clear an area for planting, and it lasts a long time as it is not readily taken into the soil. It is inexpensive but transport can be a problem, particularly if you want to cover an entire plot.

Composted Leaves make good mulch, but those from the plants you grow can carry disease over to the following season, so on the allotment they are better added to the compost bin.

Woodchip is an excellent material that can be laid thickly all over the plot. It provides all the benefits of soil protection allied to fairly rapid decomposition and the resultant improvement to the soil. It is perfectly feasible to put a layer 20cm (8") thick all over the plot, and much of this will decompose over the year and improve the soil lying beneath. You can even use it on your paths.

If you use woodchip extensively, it is worth putting an additional top dressing of general purpose fertiliser (such as blood, fish and bone) to replace the nitrogen that will be used to break down the wood in the soil. You should watch out for conifers, which have a growth-inhibiting hormone that will prevent seeds germinating (but won't affect seedlings) and also privet cuttings, which prevent most things from growing. Otherwise, most materials are fine.

Living mulches (or cover crops) are grown primarily to protect the soil. They provide a protective canopy as they grow, and feed the soil when they are dug in at the end of their life. There are fast-growing crops (such as mustard) that can be grown in spring on land that won't be planted until summer. There are deep-rooted crops (such as alfalfa) that will take nutrients from the underlying clay soil and make them available to the next crop to be planted. Vetches absorb nitrogen from the atmosphere, enriching soil after growing a heavy feeder such as potatoes. There are over-wintering crops (such as grazing rye) that are sown in autumn and protect the soil from the worst of the weather.

Special formulations, such as Tübingen Mix, incorporate a variety of flowers designed to attract butterflies, bees and other pollinators during spring and summer to increase yields from nearby food crops. With all living mulches, the trick is to turn them into the soil just before they go to seed.

COMPOSTING

Compost is an excellent soil conditioner and plant food. It regulates the supply of moisture to plants and reduces the need for watering, encourages the activity of worms which keep the soil aerated, and provides all the basic nutrients and trace elements to promote plant growth and health. And healthy plants don't require applications of pesticides and fungicides, which will please wildlife, and without wildlife you'd be surprised how difficult allotment gardening would become!

Composting vegetable waste not only makes a nutrient-rich soil conditioner, it also takes up to 30% of household waste away from landfill sites, which might not have a great effect on your council tax bill but certainly helps the environment.

With proper care, a small composting area can produce a good quantity of high quality compost every year. To achieve this, though, the compost pile requires the same care and attention as the plants themselves.

Compost is produced by the action of bacteria living off decaying plant remains. (Worms, woodlice and others also play their part, but it is the bacteria that are the main agents.) The ideal conditions are warm, damp, loose and airy: not dry or sodden, and not packed tight. Given these conditions, the bacteria can work fast (and generate a lot of heat, which kills off weed seeds) and you could have good compost in three to four months. You can achieve this by providing a good bin, the right mix of materials and the right conditions.

You don't actually need a compost bin to make compost, but they help keep the plot tidy and are useful when you come to turn the pile. Carrickfergus Borough Council provides a sturdy bin made from recycled plastic, contact Sullatober Depot on 9335 1192 for further information.

Wooden bins hold a lot more, and offer better insulation and ventilation. They're expensive to buy, but you can make one from four abandoned pallets - for best results, stand them with the wooden face of each pallet facing inwards, staple chicken wire to the outside of each and pack straw behind the wire to help insulate the pile.

Tumbler bins are convenient because they enable you to turn the compost without digging it out and repacking it, but they are expensive and hold only a small amount of material.

You can make a large, inexpensive bin from four posts and chicken wire, but you'll probably have to replace the wire every year or two.

(Wormeries are a very effective way of dealing with kitchen waste, but are less suitable for allotments and are beyond the scope of this guide.)

You can put any vegetable matter (including paper and cardboard) in a compost bin and, in time, it will rot down. To get good compost quickly, you need to ensure that there is a roughly

equal mix of woody and soft, green material. Too much woody material and very little will happen, as the compost pile will be too dry and lacking in nitrogen-rich material to help the bacteria. Too much green material may lead to anaerobic activity and an unpleasant smell. Just add what you have as it becomes available.

If you produce a lot of green waste from the kitchen and have lots of weeds, balance this with a similar quantity of woodchip. If you have a lot of twigs, chop them into small pieces (a shredder is a great help, but somewhat costly) so they're more easily mixed in. Soil is not a problem in the compost pile, but you should remove whatever soil you can from the roots of weeds. Don't add meat or dairy products, as these can produce some unpleasant toxins and will attract flies, rodents and foxes.

The pile needs careful maintenance for good composting. It should be moist to the touch, but not so damp that you can squeeze water out of it. You can usually detect a pile that is too wet by the unpleasant smell that comes from it, add some woodchip or cardboard to absorb some of the moisture. If it is too dry, water the pile with a watering can and sprinkler.

Bacteria need air, and this only penetrates a few inches into a pile, so it will need frequent aeration. The best way is to turn the entire pile over as soon as the heat starts to go (perhaps every fortnight or so in summer). If the pile isn't heating up, try mixing the materials and checking the balance of soft and woody material. (It will compost anyway, but much more slowly.)

Once the material has lost its original identity and is becoming a uniform texture and colour, the work is nearly done. Stop adding material now, and start a new pile. Soon you will be able to use the decomposed material as a soil conditioner, or you could sieve it and use the large material as a surface mulch and the finer material for potting.

CROP ROTATION

Crop rotation is the practice of planting crops in different locations each year. There are two good reasons for doing this: Each crop makes particular demands of the soil in which it is grown, and growing the same crop in the same place year after year soon depletes the soil of the goodness required by the crop. The second reason is that over the course of a season diseases associated with a particular crop build up in the soil, and that planting the same crop into soil which already

has a build-up of disease will weaken and possibly destroy the crop.

Most diseases will disappear over the course of a year or two if their favourite plant isn't available, but some can live on for 7 or 8 years. The ideal crop rotation plan ensures that a crop doesn't return to a bed for eight years, but this requires a lot of beds and careful record-keeping, and lack of space dictates that most gardeners will opt for a 3 or 4 year cycle. This will prevent most problems, but if a disease like club root takes hold you won't be able to grow brassicas in that soil for at least 7 years.

The sequence in which different crops are planted in a particular bed is determined principally by each plant's nitrogen requirement. Some require a lot of nitrogen, some a little, some actually collect nitrogen from the air and so enrich the soil. The normal cycle is to feed the soil (with manure, compost, etc.), then grow the heavy feeders, then grow the nitrogen fixers, then the light feeders, then back to feeding the soil for the next heavy feeders. Cover crops such as vetches and ryes can be incorporated into the cycle; this helps to balance the preponderance of heavy feeders in most gardening plans.

For the purpose of planning crop rotation, plants are grouped by family (because they make similar demands and have similar susceptibilities). Here are some examples of frequently grown crops, by plant family (heavy nitrogen feeders are identified HF, light feeders LF, and nitrogen fixers NF):

- *alliaceae* (LF); garlic, leek, onion, shallot
- *compositae* (HF); chicory, endive, lettuce
- *chenopodiaceae* (HF); beetroot, chard, spinach
- *cruciferae* (HF); broccoli, brussels sprout, cabbage, cauliflower, swede, turnip
- *cucurbitaceae* (HF); courgette, cucumber, marrow, pumpkin
- *gramineae* (HF); sweetcorn
- *leguminosae* (NF); broad bean, french bean, runner bean, pea *solanaceae* (HF);
- *umbelliferae* (LF); carrot, celery, dill, parsnip

A typical example might be to grow potatoes (heavy feeders) on newly fertilized soil, to follow these in the next season with peas and beans (which feed the soil), and follow these with onions

(light feeders). In the fourth season, rather than planting potatoes again (which would give only a three year cycle), a different heavy feeder from a different family might be grown (e.g. pumpkin).

Designing a crop rotation plan requires careful consideration. Most of us grow more plants from the heavy feeders category than the others, so the *Feed - HF - NF - LF - Feed* cycle is not easy to maintain. Similarly, a four or eight year cycle demands consideration about where different crops can be grown. It isn't simply a matter of saying that a particular crop can't go into the soil until the end of the cycle - it's the whole family.

Matters are further complicated by having to deal with the specific requirements of many of our favourite crops. Potatoes frequently contract scab if grown on a limed soil, so they can't follow on from brassicas, which love lime. Carrots and parsnips hate rich soils, so they can't be planted in an area that has been recently manured. They also like a well-drained, stone-free soil, so they may be limited to a few specific areas of the plot anyway. If you intend to use companion planting (growing different plants together because they afford one another protection from pests), then two or more families may be grown together and neither should return to that bed within the crop rotation cycle.

Don't let this dissuade you from producing a plan that at least meets some of the criteria. We're in the business of lessening the effect of pests and diseases, and even the best plans will fail from time to time. The best bit of advice is to remember to write down what you've grown where, and keep these records for the future.

YEAR-ROUND GARDENING

For some gardeners, the year starts at Easter and ends when the clocks go back in October. But this probably requires more time and effort than gardening year-round, and certainly is much less rewarding. Think of all the things you miss out on: nutty, crunchy sprouts; sweet-tasting parsnips; creamy cauliflowers, pungent leeks; fresh sprouting broccoli; winter salads. And it's not just the winter crops - start late in the year and you'll miss the opportunity of growing spring crops and early varieties of summer produce - a treat when they're still expensive in the shops. With all these good things to grow, how could anyone ignore their allotment during the winter!

But good food year-round is not the only reason for continuing to visit the plot in the winter

months. Nature doesn't take a break in winter - weeds continue to grow, and materials decay. By keeping on top of tasks, you'll reduce the amount of maintenance required and avoid the backlog in spring - the time when gardeners are busiest. The soil will benefit for your activity, too, and so will the wildlife.

You'll need to organise the plot for year-round use. There are three things to consider: firstly, when does each variety need to be planted; secondly, how long will it occupy the bed; and thirdly, the crop rotation plan, which should include cover crops to regenerate the soil.

The instructions on seed packets will give you a good idea of when to plant a variety and how long the soil will be occupied, and you'll find that a simple plan of each of the seasons will soon show what space you have for early and late crops. Remember the basics of crop rotation, and that the soil will require feeding after growing a greedy crop such as tomatoes or potatoes. You can add compost if you're looking to use the area again quickly, or you could grow a cover crop (there are winter crops as well as summer) for longer-term regeneration which will provide protection for the soil whilst the crop is growing and will add humus and food to the soil for the next crop. A cover crop also provides shelter for spiders, beetles and other beneficial insects.

Perhaps the most important aspect of planning for the year-round allotment, though, is to look for more interesting, less run-of-the-mill varieties to grow. One of the greatest delights of the allotments is that the variety of seeds available to you greatly outstrips anything available in supermarkets and greengrocers. To take just one example, there are at least 400 varieties of tomato you can grow, from off-white to near-black, early, mid and late season croppers, for cooking, bottling, drying, salads, sauces and more. You'll find a certain amount of seed swapping going on at the allotments, and there are now many specialist seed clubs that are able to supply unusual and distinct species and varieties for you to try.

GOOD NEIGHBOURS

These aren't necessarily allotments rules; they are simply examples of being a good neighbour. Follow them and you'll find that you'll get along with people and the allotments will be a more pleasant environment. But take care to observe the rules of your tenancy agreement, too, or your plot may be at risk.

Safety and Security: Eden Allotments are generally a safe and secure place but you may spot hazards that need attention. If you spot anything obviously unsafe, such as hypodermic syringes or anything you feel may be hazardous, such as asbestos or rats, please note where the hazard is and contact us. Please make sure you don't make the allotments more hazardous yourself. Never pour garden pesticides into old bottles. Make sure that garden pesticides are safely locked away when not in use. If you use petrol driven tools, only keep a small quantity of fuel at your plot and again make sure it's locked away. Allotments can never be fully secure. Keeping the allotment site tidy and attractive is one of the best ways of deterring anti-social activity, theft and vandalism. You can help too by keeping valuable equipment at home. If you keep tools on your plot, you should consider a secure shed. Should you experience theft or vandalism report this to Carrickfergus Police Station on 0845 600 8000. The information you give will help them track local problems and plan future policing.

Entrance Gates - you have a responsibility towards all other allotment holders to ensure you lock gates after you use it. There is little point in having fences if you do not. Think how you'd feel if someone left the gate unlocked and it was your produce that was lost. And if the fence is vandalised, don't leave it to someone else to report the matter to the Council.

Rubbish - there is no automatic right to rubbish clearance on allotments and all dumping whether vegetable waste or any other material is strictly forbidden. You may be fined and could lose your plot if you dump rubbish. From time to time there may be an opportunity to have rubbish cleared from the site when this happens, be prepared to lend a hand.

Bonfires - sorry bonfires are not allowed on the allotment site.

Paths - the maintenance of paths around your plot is your responsibility. These should be kept in a fit state to walk upon at all times. Don't destroy the path by using weedkiller on it.

Advice - advice is often welcome, but you should never press the point, even when it seems obvious to you that someone is getting something wrong. They may not want to achieve the results you look for, and you might even learn from their example.

Cultivation - allotments are provided to be used. If you don't use and take care of your plot, you may lose it. It is unfair to other gardeners (and would-be gardeners) to leave it growing

weeds throughout the year. If you have little time to spare, at least plant a cover crop to protect and feed the soil and keep the weeds at bay. You should also consider reducing the size of your plot, to do this contact the Council.

Chemicals – Although the Council would like all allotment holders to garden organically we only require allotment holders in Field D to do so. Some gardeners choose to use chemicals, some prefer to avoid them. If you need to spray a crop, do so only when there is no wind and make sure you don't send the spray onto a neighbour's plants. Being pressed for time is not an excuse to ruin someone else's gardening experience. See the '*Going Organic*' section of this guide for further information.

Communal features – It might be a hedgerow, water taps, toilets or path network. Whatever they are, these communal features help you in your gardening and you have a responsibility towards them. Pruning, tidying, litter picking, path strimming and the like are the responsibility of every allotment holder not just the Council.

USEFUL CONTACT INFORMATION

Carrickfergus Borough Council – To contact the Council telephone 028 93358000 or to contact the Parks & Countryside office directly telephone 028 93358039. Alternatively visit the Eden Allotment Gardens website at www.edenallotments.co.uk or the Council website www.carrickfergus.org.

Eden Allotment Holders Association – visit their website for an up to date list of committee members at www.edenallotments.org

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens – is a charity which supports and represents community gardens and city farms throughout the UK. For further information visit their website www.farmgarden.org.uk.

National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners – has a wealth of information and advice for allotment holders. For further information visit their website www.nsalg.org.uk.