GET TO KNOW YOUR PLOT

A guide for Dunstable allotment tenants

DUNSTABLE
TOWN COUNCIL

INTRODUCTION

Taking on a new allotment is so much fun!
The following information is intended as a guide to help you get started.

MAKE A PLAN FOR YOUR PLOT

Taking precise measurements of your plot and creating a simple plan on paper will benefit your growing success in the long term.

Your plan could include beds for growing and paths for walking. You may also wish to plan areas for compost and leaf mould, a greenhouse, a shed with guttering for rainwater collection, and an area for seating.

A plan for planting might include areas for both perennial and annual crops, and it is a good idea to create a sowing and harvesting calendar for your growing year.

ASSESS THE SOIL ON YOUR PLOT

Soils are built up over millions of years. Scientists estimate that a teaspoon of soil can contain up to 50 billion organisms. The soil on your plot is your most precious resource. Knowing and caring for the soil is the most important thing you can do. If you look after the soil the soil will look after you and your crops.

SOIL TYPE AND STRUCTURE

You cannot change the soil on your plot, but you can work with it and improve it. Soil types and structures can be loam, clay, sand, silt, or chalk. You can carry out a test for soil type and structure on your plot by collecting soil samples.

Use a trowel to take 5 to 10 samples from randomly selected growing locations on your plot. Take samples from a depth of at least 15cm. Mix samples in a bucket, take a handful of soil, work in your hands, feel texture, add drops of water if not already moist.

Remove large stones or lumps, and roll sample into a sausage shape. This will give an indication of the predominant particle types in your soil.

For example, sandy soil feels gritty and won't hold shape, clay soil feels smooth and will hold shape. The ideal soil structure is crumbly and provides space for air and water movement through the soil.

Rotating where you grow your annual crops, and adding organic matter where and when needed will keep the soil on your plot healthy and productive.

SOIL PH

The chemical composition of a soil determines its pH. The pH of your soil will determine which crops will grow best on your plot. You can carry out a simple test for alkalinity or acidity with a soil testing meter or kit, (available from most garden centres).

As described for soil structure, collect and mix samples in a bucket and then follow the instructions on the testing meter or kit. The results will help you to understand the acidity or alkalinity of the soil on your plot.

WEEDS ON YOUR PLOT

Get to know the predominant weeds that grow on your plot. Weeds are an excellent indicator of soil type and conditions. Knowing your weeds can determine how best to manage your soil.

PLANT FAMILIES

Plants are grouped into botanical families; it is good practice to grow crops that belong to the same family together. Regularly rotate where family groups are being grown to prevent the build-up of pests and diseases. Create a simple crop rotation based on what you want to grow. Remember that you can make optimum use of your plot by growing a mix of perennial and annual crops all year round.

ASSESS THE ASPECT OF YOUR PLOT

Knowing the aspect of your plot will help you to decide what crops to grow where. A small compass or a compass app on your phone can tell you which direction your plot faces: for example, North, East, South, West. Observe the position of the sun and how the light affects your plot throughout the day.

Continue to observe throughout the seasons; notice sunny, shady, exposed, and sheltered spots. Also note the lye of the land, (the topography), the prevailing wind direction and any likely frost pockets where the sun cannot reach to thaw in winter.

ASK YOUR NEIGHBOURS

Get to know your neighbouring allotment holders. Ask them which crops thrive on their plots. Allotment holders have a wealth of knowledge; and like all good gardeners they love to share their knowledge.

Enjoy your plot and happy growing

BIODIVERSITY & SUSTAINABILITY
CARING FOR YOUR PLOT AND THE PLANET

Growing your own food and flowers is one of the most planet friendly activities that you can participate in. Here are further tips to keep your plot planet friendly

Keep your plot diverse by growing a wide variety of crops and companion plants. This can prevent the build-up of pests & diseases, promote a natural eco system, & benefit pollinating insects.

Create a compost heap and a leaf mould heap. Compost and leaf mould are free.Using compost and leaf mould to feed and mulch the soil will keep it in good health. Healthy soils play a huge part in maintaining biodiversity.

Use no dig methods of cultivation. Scientists now recognise that rotavating and digging can damage the delicate ecosystem of the soil.

Use organic and cultural methods of control to protect your crops. Avoid using toxic chemicals to control pests & diseases and weeds.

Be wildlife friendly. Observe and get to know all the life forms that you share your plot with. Install bird boxes, bat boxes and other creature features.

Use peat free composts for growing. Peat is the most efficient land based store of carbon. Using peat is unsustainable and is destroying a rare & precious habitat.

Install a water butt or butts. Harvesting rainwater is free, saves water and benefits your crops.

Reduce, re-use, recycle wherever possible. Follow Central Bedfordshire Council's campaign on 'let's bin better'.

Set realistic goals for yourself, visit your plot a little and often. This can make your plot easier to manage and little wins will keep you motivated.

Keep a diary and photographs. Record your successes and your failures.

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Dunstable Town Council recommend the following websites for further guidance:

Garden Organic: www.gardenorganic.org.uk

The National Allotment Society: www.nsalg.org.uk

The Royal Horticultural Society: www.rhs.org.uk/advice/grow-your-own

Charles Dowding – No Dig: www.charlesdowding.co.uk

Central Bedfordshire Council

www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/170/recycling_-_lets_bin_better

The Brogdale Trust: www.brogdaleonline.co.uk/about-rootstocks