



Tips for a successful organic plot at Eden Allotment Gardens

An allotment is a great place to grow food, and to meet others doing the same thing. It can also be an overwhelming undertaking if you are new to the idea, have little time and are doing it all at a distance. This leaflet is full of helpful hints and tips to get you started and keep you going.

What is Organic Gardening?

Organic gardening and especially organic growing of vegetables, fruit and herbs is good for the environment and for you. Eliminating pesticide residues in your food and encouraging beneficial wildlife can only be good for us all and the ecology.

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 defenses to keep it healthy and productive.

The overgrown or new plot

Take it slowly, and allow several years to get it into shape. Don't put in anything permanent – such as fruit trees, or bed edging – until the weeds are really under control.

- Use a strimmer – you can hire one – or a large scythe to cut down tall growth.
- Cover ground with a light excluding mulch such as flattened cardboard boxes or black plastic – kept in place with straw, hay, logs. Silage plastic from agricultural merchants is cheap. This will stop weeds growing while you are clearing other areas, and will eventually kill them. Pumpkins and other vigorous crops can be planted through the mulch.
- Taking a small area of ground at a time, clear the weeds using a garden fork. Make sure you remove all the roots. Then plant, sow a green manure or mulch.
- Until weeds are under control, grow crops in wide rows to allow easy hoeing. Hoe regularly.

Planning and organisation

Measure your allotment and draw an outline plan. Mark in existing features that you want to keep. Plan out the rest of the plot, using the following suggestions.

Essential Soil Improvers

- A compost bin or two will be a great asset to your plot. The Council is offering allotment holders the opportunity to buy one for £5.00. Telephone 93351192 for further information.

Permanent crops

- You may want to grow fruit and other perennial crops such as rhubarb and asparagus.
- Think about the spacing for all these plants so that you have an accurate idea of how large an area you need.
- Space saving ideas such as growing redcurrants and gooseberries as espaliers, cordons and fans will help you fit more in.
- A 'family' tree bearing three varieties of fruit works well on allotments.
- Russian comfrey – grow three or more plants if you want to make your own liquid feed.

Vegetables

- Divide the vegetable area into plots of equal size for an effective crop rotation.
- Subdivide the plots further if you are going to grow on a narrow bed system.
- Remember to schedule in green manures for soil improving.

Welcoming wildlife

Wildlife, from hedgehogs and birds to beetles and bugs, can help keep pests and diseases in check. Create a few 'habitats' to welcome them on to your plot.

- Perennials – ground cover, herbaceous plants and small shrubs can provide food and shelter without taking up too much space.
- Annuals – annual flowers brighten up the plot and can feed pest-eating insects.

You may also consider

- A shed – if you don't have one
- A water butt – to collect rain off the shed roof
- Somewhere to sit and enjoy the fruits of your labours.

Useful techniques

- Raise plants in modules, pots and boxes, then plant out sturdy transplants.
- Protect new plants with plastic bottle cloches.
- Mark out a straight drill by standing on a rake handle or using a draw hoe along a straight edge. Water drill before sowing and cover with dry soil.
- Water transplants before lifting and planting holes before transplanting.
- Cover vulnerable plants with a mesh to protect them from pests. Particularly useful on cabbage family plants that seem to suffer more than most.
- Grow pest and disease resistant varieties, especially blight resistant potatoes.
- Label rows and keep a note of what grew where – it makes planning much easier next time.
- If you are a new or long distance allotment holder, grow plants that can survive without very regular attention – onions, potatoes, broad beans and pumpkins, for example.

Links

Soil Association website at www.soilassociation.org

'Garden Organic' website at www.gardenorganic.org.uk

Carrickfergus Borough Council Allotments website at www.edenallotments.co.uk

Eden Allotment Holders Association website: at www.edenallotments.org

For further information please read the Council advice leaflet 'New Plottolders Guide' for a copy please contact the Parks & Open Spaces Section on 028 93358231 or visit www.edenallotments.co.uk