

Things to consider before taking on a plot

1. Clearing a Plot

When tenants take on a new plot it may be after a lengthy process of removing the existing tenant and offering the plot to other people on the waiting list. This can mean that plot has been left unworked for at least two months and in the summer months this can mean that the plot is very overgrown.

So be prepared for hard work clearing the plot. The new tenant has 3 months to cultivate 25% of the plot and after that time to cultivate the remainder of the plot within a year. There are a few methods of clearing a plot such as using weed matting or suppressant to cover the areas that you are not working on. We strongly recommend getting some crops in within the first three months to encourage you to see the fruits of your labours!

2. Health and Physical Ability

Considering the above, it is wise to look after yourself whilst clearing the plot and beyond. Regular visits to the allotment instead of sporadic long ones will make it easier on your back, knees, wrists or heart try not to take on too much at any one time. If you feel that you may not be able to meet the physical demands of a plot on your own, then you may want to consider sharing with someone you know or taking on a plot no larger than 5 rods.

3. Managing Weeds

All plants, given the right conditions, want to grow and weeds are no exception! There is plenty that you can do to reduce the number of weeds, such as digging over the ground and removing the roots, or double digging or using weed matting to cover areas such as an internal path as well as ensuring that you make regular visits to the plots, especially during the main growing season. However, weeds are a persistent problem and will require physical effort and patience to remove. Weed killers can be used but they MUST be an off the shelf product not industrial or agricultural weed killer. We would urge care when spraying weed killer to prevent 'drift' onto neighbouring plots.

4. Time Commitment

You need to think about whether you have a regular amount of time that you can commit each week to work the plot. Working full time or having other commitments need to be considered. We recommend visiting your plot at least twice a week to stay on top of weeding and other jobs. The number of visits you make during the growing season, to water and harvest crops for example, may be considerably more than this and if you don't have an effective watering system you may find during very hot or dry weather that you must visit daily.

5. Tools and Equipment

You will need some tools and equipment to work your plot and if you are buying new there will be a cost involved. You can buy second hand tools or share with other tenants. You will also need to consider whether you are going to bring your tools on site each time you visit or store them in a shed on your plot. The tools that we recommend for new tenants are a hoe, spade, fork, rake, trowel and watering can.

You might also want to invest in compost bins and water butts to collect rainwater off a shed or greenhouse.

6. Children

Many young children are very enthusiastic about growing things and allotment can be a great place for children to learn.

However, there are things you need to consider - an allotment plot, particular one that has not been worked for a while, may have some safety issue you need to address before taking young children onto the plot (broken glass, weeds such as bramble or stinging nettles and uneven ground).

Also, a very committed young child may lose interest quite quickly, so you need to consider that you will do if your child is not as interested as you in spending time on the plot.

7. Crop Failures

If you are a new tenant, it will be inevitable that you will have the occasional crop failure and you need to be prepared for this. Successful tenants see this as a learning opportunity, but it can be very disheartening after all the effort that you have put in.

It takes time to prepare the ground and it is unrealistic to expect to get a whole season's worth of perfect veg during the first year on your plot. As time goes on you will learn more about what grows where and when and in what conditions and the ground will be improved, all of which will increase your chances of success.

8. Maintaining Motivation

Maintaining motivation, especially during the first year or so, can be difficult. Whilst you are waiting to be offered a plot you may want to draw up a plan of what you would like to see on your plot so that when you get a plot you can start to work towards this.