

**12/02/08 - Some Good Advice!**

This excellent advice has come into the GAS email from a long standing, very experienced gardener...

We have a major problem with inexperienced people taking on plots without being aware of the necessary time involved for cultivation. We see them making an enthusiastic start in spring, doing a bit of digging then finding it is all too much. The dug plot then becomes overgrown with couch, dock and bindweed and is difficult to let. It might therefore help if those enquiring for a plot are offered some guidance. This rough draft is offered only for preliminary consideration. Len Wingfield

**THINKING OF RENTING AN ALLOTMENT?**

Allotment gardening can be very rewarding, but cultivating even a small plot takes quite a lot of time and effort. The television programmes tend to make it seem so easy. In reality a small (5 rod) plot is likely to require an average of about 5 hours work a week, more in spring, less in winter but nevertheless getting out whenever the weather is suitable. It is not a warm weather only pastime. The allotment year starts in September, and it is important to make a start on your new plot as soon as possible. The priority is to prevent it from deteriorating by becoming weed-infested. This means keeping grass paths cut and perennial weeds eliminated. It is not just for tidiness. If grass is allowed to grow long, couch grass (a creeping-root grass which is difficult to eradicate) will take hold and invade the cultivated area. Weeds allowed to seed and spread build up future trouble not only on your own plot but on neighbouring plots too.

It can be a mistake to dig the whole plot at once. It is better to dig only as much at a time as can be sown or planted, and cultivated by hoeing, otherwise weeds seize their chance and invade the bare ground. It is of course possible to cover dug earth with black plastic to prevent weed seeds germinating and nutrients leaching through the soil., but it is important to secure the edges well by burying under the soil or with heavy objects. Otherwise the wind sooner or later gets under the plastic and blows it away, often ripping it up in the process. Machine-cultivation has its place, but in the process perennial weed roots are merely chopped up so that each piece grows again and you have even more weeds. It is generally better to dig by spade and fork, carefully removing perennial weed roots as you go.

Although most crops are sown in spring, several crops need to be sown or planted in the autumn or winter. These include autumn onion sets, shallots, garlic and broad beans. Some salad crops can also be sown and some types of cabbage planted

out. In every case the soil needs to be prepared first.

Some allotment sites have rabbit problems. In such cases weekly checks of the stock-wire are necessary to see whether rabbits have burrowed under or made holes through. (Yes, believe it or not, they often do make holes through stock-wire!)

For those inexperienced in vegetable growing the winter is the best time for learning. A range of excellent books are available in public libraries. Also most helpful is advice from your neighbours on the allotment. They will be able to tell you what grows well and what are the particular problems on your allotment site.