



seed to plate

General Principles for Plots

The aim of seed to plate is to make it easy for you to turn your plot into a series of highly productive veg beds that are absolutely bursting with fresh vegetables for the best part of a year. Even with just a small plot you can grow an enormous quantity of veg, provided you grow the right varieties, at the right time, in the right way.

You can find out how to grow specific veg varieties in the Grow Guides. Here are a number of more general principles you should also bear in mind.

Lots of Sunshine

Sunshine is essential for growing veg. Because the sun moves round most plots will get sunshine for a good proportion of the day, which is perfect for most plants

But watch out for North facing walls. A plot directly in front of a North facing wall will only catch the sun in the very height of summer – which is inadequate - unless you're into growing mushrooms.

Bed sizes and shapes

The veg beds in your plot design will generally be 4ft wide and 8ft long. We've found this to be the perfect size. It means you can easily reach across the soil without stepping on it, to sow, grow and harvest.

Paths are 2ft wide. Any narrower than this and you'll find yourself in all kinds of weird contorted positions as you try to navigate between your beds. Better to give yourself a generous amount of space so you can tend your plot with ease.

We turn our beds into 'raised beds', which essentially means a wooden surround made from planks of wood. They look great and make managing your plot much simpler. These can be constructed out of timber available from your local DIY shop. Opt for plain timber and treat it yourself with a preservative, or a simpler method is to buy pressure treated or 'Tannalised E' timber. Historically this treatment involved impregnating timber with copper, chrome and arsenic - not good stuff to have around food! Now the treatment is only copper based, and because it's applied under pressure it won't leach into your soil.

Find out how we make raised beds in the video lessons (-it's really easy). Otherwise just mark out your beds with a small stake or cane at each corner so you know where to walk, and where your plants should start.

Pack your soil full of goodness

Preparing your soil can be a bit of a chore, but creating soil rich in nutrients and organic matter is the key to a successful veg patch. Plants will grow faster and produce a much bigger crop. You'll be very glad you did it once summer arrives and you're reaping the bounty!

For each 8ft x 4ft bed add at least one 150L bag of general purpose compost from your local DIY shop. Homemade compost or farmyard manure is also perfect. Spread it on the top of your bed and mix the whole together with your soil using a spade. It's a good idea to sprinkle on a little organic fertiliser at the same time.

Let nature do the watering

The compost added to your soil will also act as a reservoir storing up rainwater and releasing it in dry spells, so you won't need to water your plot unless it is very dry. In which case get the hose out and drench it. You want to ensure water percolates very deep into the soil to encourage roots to head down.

Take out weeds

Once your veg is up and running there will be little room for weeds to grow so you won't have much of a problem.

Earlier on there's bit more work to do. If you're using the ground for the first time there will probably be 'perennial' weeds growing in it. These include things like stinging nettles, bindweed, couch grass etc. that will grow back year after year. Most have thick white roots (2mm or more generally). You need to get these out. The best way to do this is to dig the soil with a fork, breaking up lumps as you go and teasing these wicked white roots and dumping them well away from your plot.

Even small sections of root left behind can regenerate new plants, but once they're gone you won't have to dig your soil ever again! Spread compost/manure on your beds every Autumn for the worms to take in and avoid compacting your soil by walking it, and the digging's over.

'Annual' weeds are much easier to deal with than perennial weeds. They grow from seed every year, and every time you dig your soil you'll be bringing dormant seeds to the surface that will be triggered into life by sunlight. They consume light, water and nutrients intended for your veg so kill these off when they're small by going over them with a sharp hoe, or pulling out by hand. The loose structure of your un-trampled soil will make it easy to pull them out.

Pay particular attention to the veg seed you've sown directly in the soil. They can easily disappear amongst a fresh crop of annual weeds, so weed around them regularly.

Make slugs and snails your enemies

Slugs and snails spend their lives Hoovering up succulent leaves and stems. Your veg is a prime target, especially young juicy seedlings. They can make your life a misery. So take direct action!

The easiest way of dealing with them is slug pellets. Traditional slug pellets are blamed for killing birds, hedgehogs etc. All of which is probably true. That's why it's essential you use the organic slug pellets we sell. They're a new generation product that's only been around a couple of years that has no harmful effects on wildlife, and will eventually break down into soil nutrients.

Always keep a sprinkling of slug pellets around young seedlings and recently planted out plants. Once they've grown a bit they should be able to fend for themselves. It's also always worth combing your plants every now and again to pull them off by hand. Offer children 5p for every one they find... depending on how mean you are!

Timings and Spacings

Each variety of veg has specific sowing requirements. Get it wrong and your plants can be wiped out by frosts, become infested with bugs, or both! It can become complicated when you're growing a variety of different veg. That's why we've created a Sowing Calendar for you so you can easily see when your specific seeds need to be sown. We'll also send you an email each month prompting you when seeds need to be sown.

Put your plants at the wrong spacings and they either grow tall and spindly, or you'll end up wasting valuable bed space. If you've already used our plot designer you'll see that the vast majority of plants have 12in between rows - that's about the length of a trowel. Bigger plants like courgettes need 2ft between plants. You'll find all the specific spacing information you need in your Grow Guides.

Starting plants off inside

Most plants can be sown directly into your soil, but those that originate from warmer climates like Tomatoes and Courgettes need to be started off inside so they're not damaged by frost.

We sow these seeds in Roottrainers. They're very easy to use. Just fill the cells with multipurpose compost that you can buy in any DIY store, pop in your seeds, cover with a layer of compost and water gently.

Once you've sown your seeds, place the trays on a sunny windowsill and water about once a week. Aim to keep the compost moist, but don't let it get waterlogged. It's essential your plants have small pockets of air in their compost to feed on.

The clear plastic drip tray can double up as a cover to keep the surface of the compost moist and your freshly sown seeds moist. I generally remove the cover and use it as a base once my seedlings emerge.

Put the roottrainer on a sunny windowsill, in a conservatory, or in a greenhouse if you have one. If you have none of these you might want to invest in a Plant House, which is essentially a mini greenhouse. The ones we sell are made from oak and will last for many years.

Transfer your frost-delicate plants outside at the end of May when the frosts are well and truly behind us.

Sowing in Gutters

I sow some of my plants in gutters before moving them to my plot. They're really convenient for peas, and leafy like lettuce and swiss chard that need to grow at quite wide (12in) spacings.

Sow in a gutter and you can raise a lot of seedlings in a small area, free from competition from weeds. Once the plants are established they can be eased out from the gutter individually, or as a group, into their final growing position. Remember to soak the compost in the gutter beforehand and the plants will slide out very easily.

They're also ideal for follow on crops if you're short of bed space. Seedlings can be raised in a gutter and then slotted into your plot when they're 3-4in high, as and where space has come available from plants that you've harvested.

Labelling

Right after sowing any seeds, put a label in, otherwise it's very easy to forget what's gone where. Write on labels with a pencil and you can scrub the writing off to use again next year.