GETTING STARTED ON YOUR ALLOTMENT

Produced by the

WESTCLIFF LAND CULTIVATION SOCIETY

Why have an allotment?

Renting an allotment isn't just about growing fresh, good quality food, its also a way of getting out in the open air and exercising in a social environment. Allotments often provide some of the only green spaces to be found in today's towns and cities, and research has shown that growing and tending plants from seedling to harvest is not only relaxing but an excellent way of relieving the stresses of modern living. Allotments are also great places for wildlife and help to preserve local distinctiveness, whilst at the same time promoting cultural diversity.

An amazing variety of fruit and vegetables can be grown, often at a considerable saving to shop prices. Most allotment sites have a thriving sense of community where neighbours will always help each other out and share their knowledge and experience. What's more, allotmenteering is updating it's image as concerns about food safety, health awareness and loss of bio-diversity increase. Many more families and young people are to be observed cultivating their plots as the 'grow your own' movement becomes the lifestyle choice of the environmentally aware.

Getting started - 3 golden rules

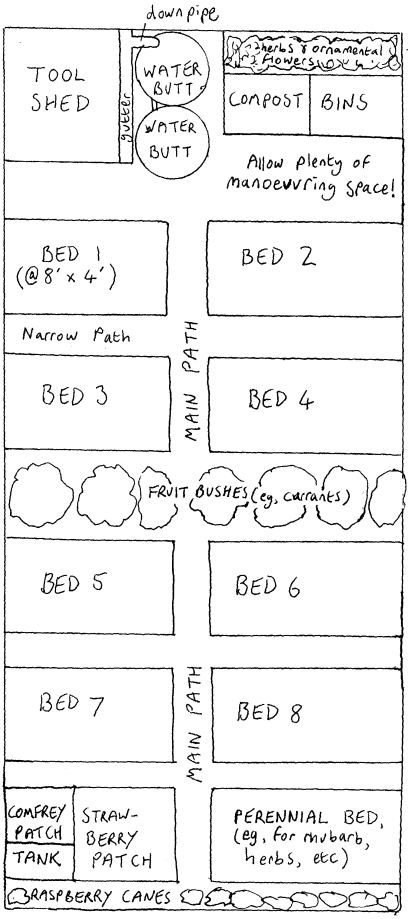
Really, there's only one way of managing an allotment - and that's your own! But it's always useful to have a few guidelines to help out, especially when faced with the daunting sight of an overgrown plot for the first time.

My first golden rule would be "don't overdo it". Clearing land that has been taken over by perennial weeds such as couch grass or docks can be pretty strenuous labour. Therefore it is probably better to set about cultivating a small area thoroughly rather than take on too much and simply exhausting yourself and your enthusiasm. For a beginner I'd suggest tackling not more than a third or half a plot in the first year. Secondly, "take it easy". Spend time just observing and seeing what is going on. What are other people doing, and what is working well for them? Learn to fit in with the rhythms of the seasons - early spring is the time of fresh growth when the soil starts to warm up and become workable. Once the last frosts have passed in late spring and early summer it's the main planting time. Things really get busy during the chaos of midsummer, when everything seems to need watering and weeding at once. Late summer and autumn is when to start relaxing and enjoying your harvest, a mellow time as the pumpkins swell and leaves begin to turn gold. Then it's the stillness of winter, when the earth rests and retreats within itself. And time as well for us to be indoors, reflecting on the year gone by, as well as planning with our seed catalogues for when the cycle begins again. My third, and probably most important rule is, "enjoy yourself!" If growing your own isn't a pleasure, then it really isn't worth doing!

Managing your plot

How you choose to manage your allotment will depend on what you want from it, as well as your time, energy and other commitments. For example, do you have ambitions to win the cup for the best kept plot in the borough, or are you more interested in simply providing a few locally grown fresh vegetables for the kitchen table? Do you spend several hours every day on your allotment, or does your family or job mean you can you only make it down there every other week or so? Do you go there mainly for a bit of socialising and relaxation or are you a hardcore self-sufficiency buff?

Whatever your personal approach, its worth drawing up a plan of how you are going to tackle and manage your bit of ground. Below is one sample of how a typical plot might be laid out, this could be adapted to your own requirements. It's also a good idea to keep records of what you have planted where each year, including sowing and harvest dates, and which varieties have performed well (and, just as importantly, which haven't!).



THINK ABOUT...

WATER
Always a valuable commodity, so harvest as much as possible, e.g, from your shed roof, etc.

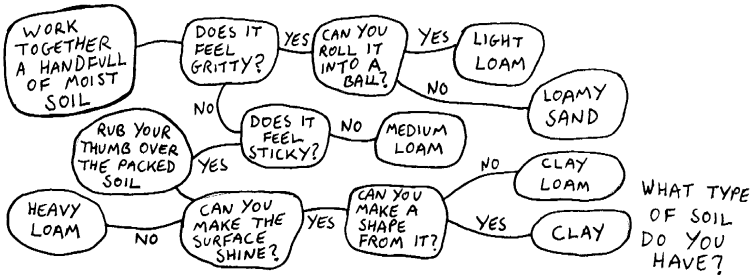
WHY BEDS?
Dividing your plot into permanent beds separated by by paths means the beds are easier to maintain. Beds should be no more than 4' wide so that it is easy to reach the centre from either side without stepping on the Soil.

COMFREY PATCH
Comfrey, rotted down with nettles in a tank of rainwater, makes a perfect liquid fertiliser, so consider setting aside a small area where this perennial plant can grow.

FLOWERS
Not only brighten up your patch, but attract beneficial insects such as bees, ladybirds and hoverflies.

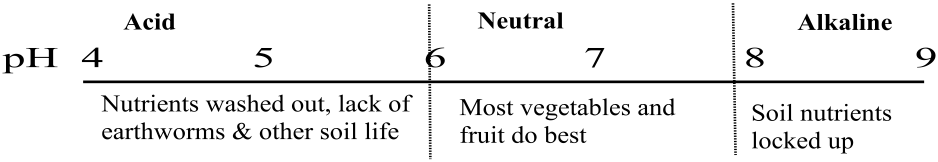
Understanding your soil

The soil on your allotment is principally composed of nonliving components produced by weathering of surface rocks, soluble nutrients, gasses and water and organic matter (humus). Depending on soil particle size, it is broadly divided into one of three categories, clay, sand or loam. It's possible to find out which you have by performing a simple hand test.



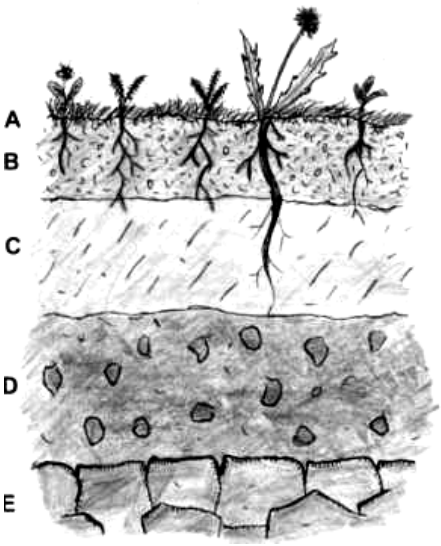
Your soil type will affect what will grow well on your plot- brassicas (the cabbage tribe) and potatoes will do well on heavy clays, whilst carrots, peas, parsnips and early outdoor crops may not. The reverse is the case with sandy soils, whilst beetroots, onions and carrots prefer silty soils.

Your soil type will also determine the best way of managing your plot. Clay and silt soils should be cultivated only when just moist - not too wet or too dry. Avoid walking on clay soils, especially when wet as this will cause compaction. Clay soils tend to be rich in nutrients, but many of these are locked up and unavailable to your plants. The addition of plenty of organic matter (compost) will improve the soil's overall structure as well as nutrient availability. A sandy soil is very free draining and thus does not hold nutrients well. Adding organic matter will improve its structure and water holding capacity. Mulches will help prevent moisture loss as well as keeping down weed growth. All soils will benefit greatly from adding as much compost and organic matter as you can spare.



The acidity or alkalinity of your soil (it's pH) is important as this will effect it's overall fertility. It can be measured using a simple testing kit that you can buy in any garden centre. Most of the fruit and vegetables that we want to grow prefer a neutral soil, although brassicas prefer slightly alkaline conditions whilst potatoes and strawberries like a soil that is slightly acid. Over-acidity can be corrected by applying ground limestone, whilst adding plenty of organic matter will help to correct over-alkalinity.

Soil structure



Digging out a soil profile (that is, a smooth sided square hole a couple of feet wide and deep) will reveal a number of distinct layers to your soil;
A) Humus: organic matter in relatively undecomposed form. This layer tends to be dark and rich in smell and texture. Raw, semi-decomposed organic matter may be recognisable amongst its components, e.g., leaf mould, twiggy material, etc.
B) Topsoil: well decomposed organic matter, mixed with a smaller amount of minerals.
C) Layer of mixed decomposed organic matter and mineral content.
D) Subsoil or mineral layers, the content of which varys according to the nature of the soil and its parent material.
E) Bedrock or parent material, which breaks down at the upper surface due to

To dig or not to dig...

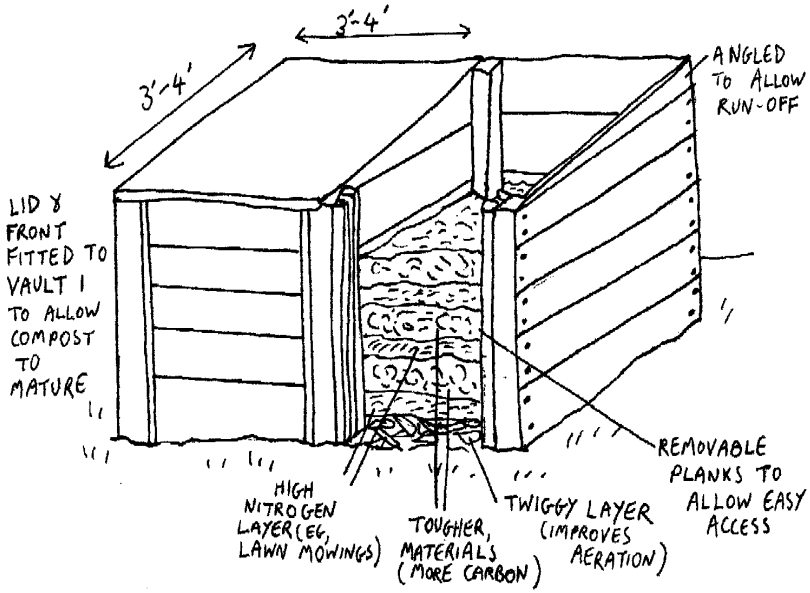
The primary reasons for digging our plots are to remove weeds, to loosen and aerate the soil and to incorporate organic matter such as compost or manure. However too much digging can damage the soil's health and actually cause more weed problems than it solves. Whilst digging is an effective way of removing perennial weed roots, it can also cause dormant seeds to come to the surface and germinate. Digging can also damage soil structure and cause problems like compaction, can disturb the soil life balance, and, by exposure to the air, tends to burn up nutrients which then need to be replenished. No dig methods rely on nature to carry out cultivation operations. Organic matter such as well rotted manure, compost, etc, is added directly to the soil surface as a mulch at least 2 or 3 inches deep, which is then incorporated by the actions of worms pulling it downwards. No dig systems are said to be freer of pests and diseases, and moisture is also better retained under mulch.

Converting to a no dig system is however a long term process, and requires plentiful organic matter to provide mulch material. It is also necessary to thoroughly remove any perennial weed roots from the area beforehand, although they can be weakened by applying a light excluding surface layer such as large sheets of cardboard or several thicknesses of opened out newspaper (overlapped to provide thorough coverage) before adding the compost mulch.

No dig techniques are not appropriate in all situations, but any gardener would do well to at least consider minimising soil disturbing practices.

Making compost

The compost heap is at the heart of any fertile plot. This is the main source of humus, the very stuff of life itself, providing both nutrients and structure when it is added to the land. It is advisable to have at least two compost bins (these can be built out of old scrap wood - palettes are ideal - and ought to have a lid to keep the rain off), so that one heap can mature whilst the other is being built. Aim for a good balance of 'brown' (ie, high in carbon materials such as tough, woody plant stems, straw, twigs, etc) and 'green' (ie, high in nitrogen materials such as grass mowings, fresh weeds, raw fruit and vegetable wastes, etc) ingredients. In a few hours this should be too hot for you to comfortably insert your hand into it's centre - this means it is active! Turn it over regularly, don't allow it to either become too wet or dry out too much, and the books say it will be good, friable compost in as little as six weeks in summer, although my experience is that at least six months is a far more realistic time scale!



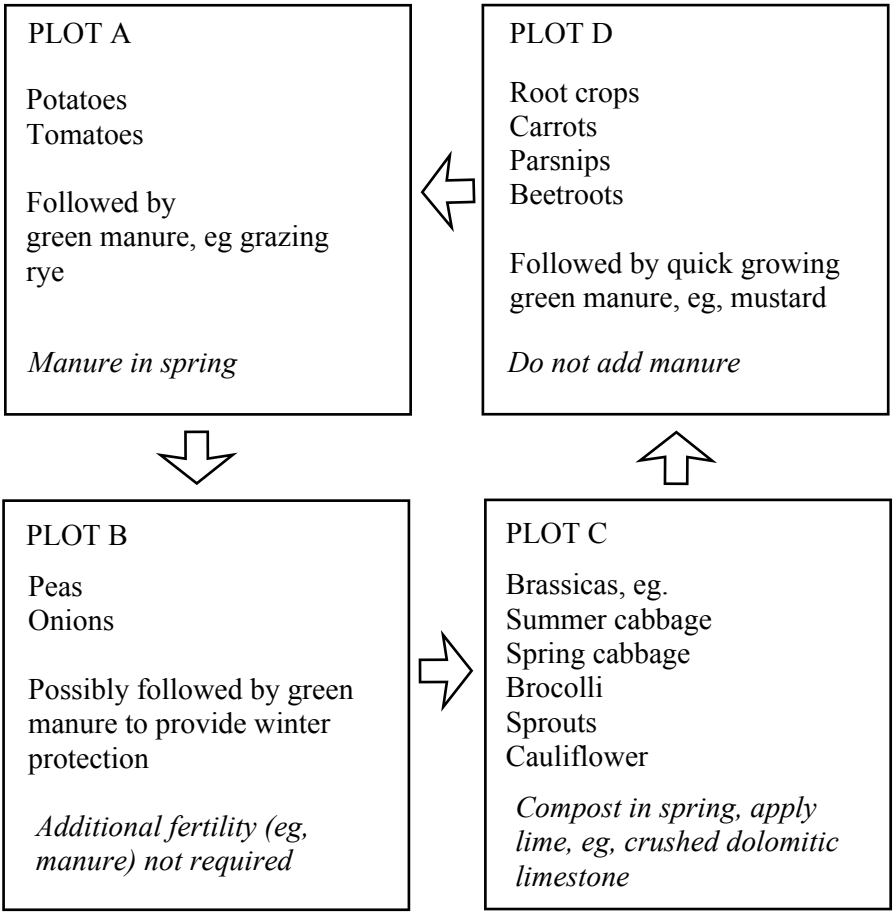
In theory, anything that was once alive can go into the compost heap. However cooked kitchen scraps or meat wastes are likely to either putrefy or attract vermin such as rats, and so should be excluded, although they are suitable for worm composting systems (this involves feeding such scraps to brandling worms in a special plastic bin. These will quickly break them down into a high nutrient worm compost that is too rich for use as a seed compost, but is useful as a top dressing or as an addition to potting composts).

Autumn leaves should not be added to compost piles as they decompose very slowly. Instead these should be piled up separately and allowed to break down over a year or so into leaf mould, an excellent free-of-charge soil conditioner.

Crop rotation

Rotation is the practice of moving crops around your plot from year to year so that they don't grow in the same place all the time. There are a number of reasons why this is good practice, including;

- ✓ In order to prevent diseases like clubroot, eelworm, etc building up in the soil
- ✓ Control of weeds is easier to achieve by regularly changing their growing conditions
- ✓ To prevent the soil becoming exhausted
- ✓ To make best use of soil nutrients as different plant families have different requirements



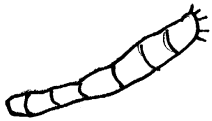
A suggested four year crop rotation scheme that can adapted to your requirements.

Who's who on the plot

Inevitably you will be sharing your allotment with a variety of other bugs, grubs and other creepy crawlies (not to mention the other billion or so bacteria or fungi micro-organisms to be found in every teaspoon of healthy soil). It's worth knowing which of these are welcome and which less so... Even those that are 'pests' have their part to play (such as providing a source of food for beneficial insects), so aim to manage their populations rather than trying to wipe them out completely...

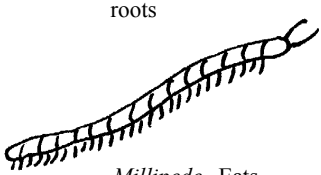
Discourage;

Aphids. These tiny (1mm) insects form colonies that suck sap and debilitate plants, especially broad beans and brassicas



Leatherjacket (Cranefly larvae). Earthy coloured and squashy, attack plant roots and stems

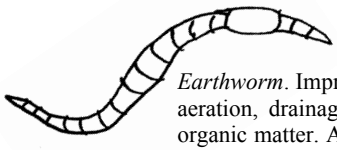
Chafer grub. Creamy coloured with a brown head. Feeds on plant roots



Millipede. Eats bulbs, potatoes and plant roots

Slugs. Feed on young plants and leaves. Larger slugs prefer dead vegetation and are less of a problem.

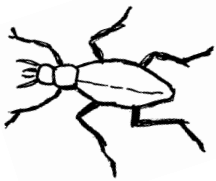
Encourage;



Earthworm. Improve soil fertility through aeration, drainage and incorporating organic matter. Adding lots of compost will increase their numbers

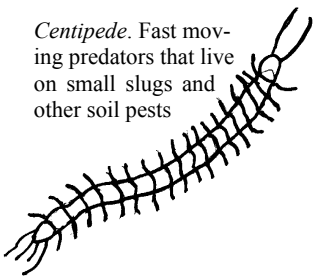
Hoverfly. Will devour vast amounts of of aphids. Plant plenty of flowers to attract them

Ladybird. Their larvae in particular will attack and eat large amounts of aphids. Plant flowers to attract them and create habitats for them to shelter



Ground beetles. Predators of slugs, mites and other pests. Create a habitat for them by leaving down pieces of wood, etc for them to shelter under

Centipede. Fast moving predators that live on small slugs and other soil pests

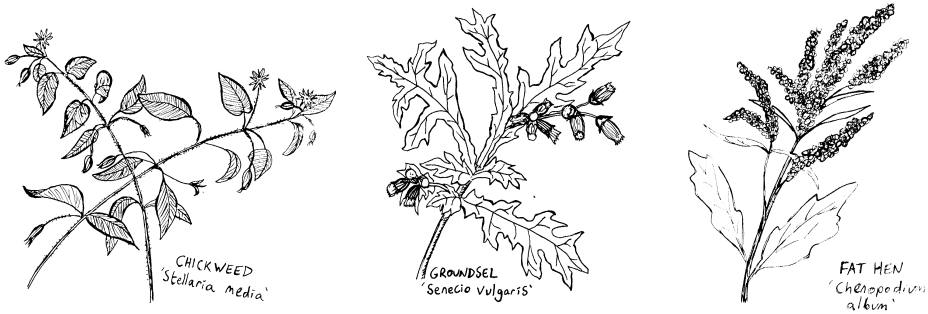


Also encourage frogs, toads, newts, hedgehogs, etc to control pests...

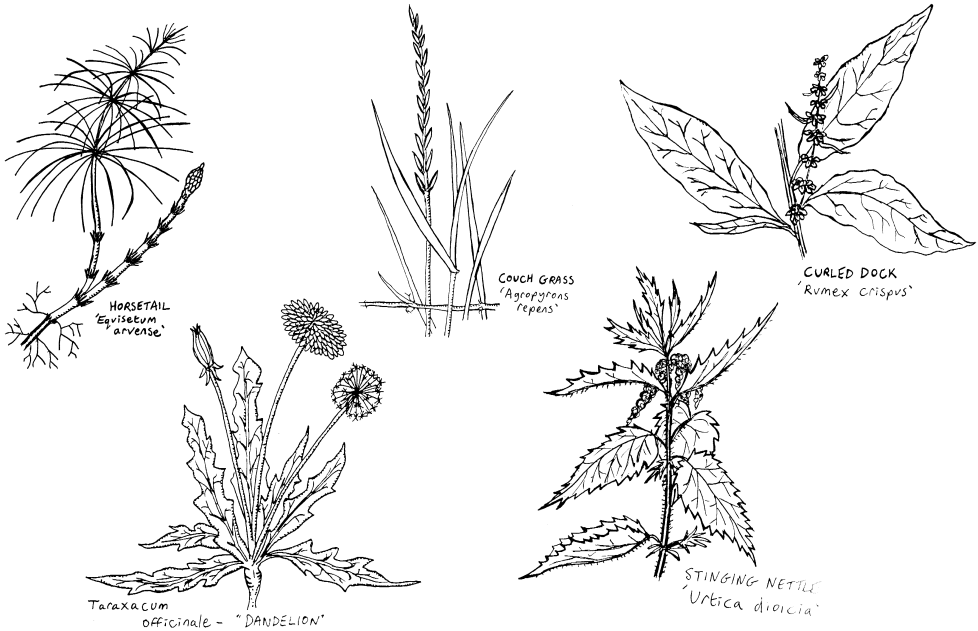
The weeder's digest

Weeds are often described as 'any plant growing in the wrong place'. Indeed, given half a chance many will compete with our food crops and return cultivated land to wilderness. However, consider tolerating them to some degree away from productive areas, for they can also be very useful. They can tell us much about the condition of our land (nettles indicate fertile soil whilst horsetail suggests compaction and drainage problems for example), add nutrients to the compost heap, encourage wildlife, and many are even edible or have medicinal properties. Weeds are generally either annual or perennial in habit;

Annuals - Grow from seed each year and die at the end of the season. Are fairly easily controlled by light hoeing.



Perennials - Live for several years. These tend to be deeper rooted and harder to permanently remove, needing to be either deeply dug, or else mulched out with a light excluding soil cover for at least a season.



Year round food from your plot

MONTH	SOW	PLANT	AVAILABLE (in brackets)= stored
January	Broad beans	Bare rooted fruit trees & bushes, garlic	Cabbage, savoy, heading broccoli, brussels sprouts, kale, leeks, salsify, winter spinach, lambs lettuce, celeriac, (Beets, carrots, onions, parsnips, potatoes, shallots, swedes, tomatoes (bottled), garlic, apples, pears)
February	Peppers (under glass), cabbage (under glass), leeks (under glass), broad beans	Bare rooted fruit trees & bushes, garlic	Cabbage, early sprouting broccoli, brussels sprouts, kale, leeks, salsify, winter spinach, salsify, lambs lettuce, rhubarb (forced), (Beets, carrots, onions, parsnips, potatoes, shallots, swedes, tomatoes (bottled), garlic, apples, quinoa)
March	Cabbages, tomatoes (under glass), leeks, carrots, lettuce, peppers (under glass), peas, onions, turnips, broad beans, summer spinach, celeriac, Cut & come salads (under glass)	Bare rooted fruit trees & bushes, onion sets, early potatoes, brassica seedlings	Broccoli, cabbage, kale, salsify leaves, chickweed, (Beet, parsnips, garlic, potatoes, tomatoes (bottled), turnips, apples)
April	Carrots, brassicas, leeks, radishes, peas, beans, spinach, beets, lettuce, parsnips, swedes, squashes & courgettes (under glass), Cut & come salads	Brassicas, onion sets, potatoes, perennial herbs & vegetables	Late broccoli, cabbage, leeks, perennial & spring onions, spinach, rhubarb, salsify leaves, herbs & perennial leaves,nettles, (Beets, onions, tomatoes (bottled), garlic, quinoa, potatoes, apples)
May	Beets, brassicas, lettuce, runner beans, squashes, spinach, quinoa, turnips, sweetcorn, Cut & come salads	Brassicas, squashes, sweetcorn, perennial herbs & vegetables	Broccoli, cabbage, lettuce, summer spinach, herbs & perennial leaves, nettles, perennial & spring onions, (Onions, garlic, potatoes, quinoa, tomatoes (bottled))

June	Beets, turnips, peas, brassicas, spinach, Cut & come salads	Leeks, tomatoes, sweetcorn, brassica seedlings, runner beans, squashes, peppers, perennial herbs & vegetables	Broad beans, carrots, cauliflower, cabbage, lettuce, Japanese & perennial onions, early potatoes, early peas, radish, spinach, turnips, gooseberries, rhubarb, strawberries, nettles, herbs & perennial leaves, edible flowers, (Quinoa, tomatoes (bottled))
July	Swedes, brassicas, beets, spinach, carrots, lettuce	Runner beans, sweetcorn, squashes, leeks, perennial herbs & vegetables	Beans, beets, early carrots, lettuce, summer cabbages, lettuce, peas, onions, early potatoes, spinach, garlic, radishes, gooseberries, cherries, plums, red & blackcurrants, herbs & perennial leaves, (Quinoa, tomatoes (bottled))
August	Spinach, brassicas, spring onions	Spring cabbages, perennial herbs & vegetables	Beans, beets, cabbages, carrots, lettuce, squashes, marrows, onions, peas, potatoes, radishes, spinach, garlic, tomatoes, red & blackcurrants, apples, gooseberries, raspberries, perennial vegetables & herbs, (Quinoa, tomatoes (bottled))
September	Brassicas, lettuce, beets, Cut & come salads	Perennial herbs & vegetables, spring cabbage	Beans, cabbage, beets, carrots, cauliflower, lettuce, squashes & marrows, onions, potatoes, peppers, peas, spinach, tomatoes, plums, apples, blackberries, peaches, perennial herbs & vegetables, quinoa, (Garlic)
October	Broad beans, Cut & come salads	Bare rooted fruit trees & bushes, Japanese onions, garlic	Runner beans, beets, spinach, squashes, brocolli, cabbage, leeks, lettuce, onions, potatoes, parsnips, tomatoes, apples, pears, blackberries, (Quinoa, garlic)
November	Broad beans	Bare rooted fruit trees & bushes, garlic	Beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, leeks, onions, potatoes, parsnips, spinach, apples, pears, (Quinoa, garlic, tomatoes (bottled))
December	Broad beans	Bare rooted fruit trees & bushes	Brocolli, celeriac, winter cabbage, carrots, leeks, kale, onions, potatoes, salsify, swede, turnip, parsnips, (Beets, garlic, tomatoes (bottled))

See ‘further reading’ list for more details about growing these crops

Some useful contacts

WLCS Committee members
Chair - Jim Clarke (plot 72S) 01702 343816
Secretary - Keith Baxter (plot 185)
Site manager - Pat Salisbury (plot 6) 07828 193410
Deputy Site Manager - Steve Daykin (plots 75,76, 46)
Treasurer - Anne Sills (plot 88S) 01702 433771
Canteen Manager - Pete Moss (plot 41)
Website and newsletter - Graham Burnett (plot 130N) graham@spiralseed.co.uk
John Cole (plot 34 & 35N)
Karen Sutherland (plots 79-80S) 01702 472539
Jaquie and Will Dawson

WLCS Website - www.wlcsallotments.org.uk

Local
Westborough Residents Association (RAW) - 155 Fairfax Drive, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex, SS0 9BQ. Tel 01702 346211
South East Essex Organic Gardeners - Carole Shorney, 19 Folly Lane, Hockley, Essex SS5 4SE. Tel. 01702 201914

National
National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners - O'Dell House, Hunters Road, Corby, Northants NN17 5JE
Allotments Regeneration Initiative - Bethan Stagg, Co-ordinator, The GreenHouse, Hereford St, Bedminster, Bristol BS3 4NA
Royal Horticultural Society - 80 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PE
Henry Doubleday Research Association - National Centre for Organic Gardening, Ryton on Dunsmore, Coventry, CV8 3LG
Permaculture Association - BCM Permaculture Association, London, WC1N 3XX

Further reading

The Vegetable Expert - DG Hessayon (PBI). Good for basic information.
Vegetables For Small Gardens and *Salads For Small Gardens* - Joy Larkcom (Hamlyn). For those who want more depth.
The HDRA Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening - Pauline Pears (ed) (Dorling Kindersley). Everything you need to know about the organic approach.
The Allotments Handbook - Sophie Andrews (Ecologic books). A guide to promoting and protecting your site.
Allotments, Landscape and Culture - Colin Ward & David Crouch (5 Leaves Books). Fascinating history and ideas for the future.
Permaculture A Beginners Guide - Graham Burnett (Spiralseed books). An introduction from yours truly!

Allotments UK email discussion list - to subscribe send a blank email to; AllotmentsUK-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

This booklet written and illustrated by Graham Burnett (www.spiralseed.co.uk) for WLCS.