



ALLOTMENTS: CAN YOU DIG IT?

Nanette Fielding puts on her wellies and calls a spade a spade

If you're lucky enough to have an allotment September is a busy time for harvesting. Having an allotment can be a wonderful experience, and it's certainly the case that the more effort you put in, the more you'll be rewarded with homegrown produce for you and your family.

For real success, you need to be able to commit a minimum three or four hours each week, regardless of the weather. But the benefits far exceed the work required, as you will have a cheap source of fresh fruit and vegetables... and be able to enjoy all the benefits of a healthy diet.

An allotment is a great opportunity to spend time outside enjoying nature. You'll feel a real sense of achievement and wellbeing and, as gardening is such a good form of exercise, you'll have an excellent excuse to cancel that gym membership. Working on the land helps reduce stress and can engender a feeling of community spirit: you'll meet some fascinating people from whom you will learn a great deal. And it's a fantastic way for children to learn to love fresh fruit and vegetables.

Do be aware though that many allotment sites only let plots to residents of a specific borough, neighbourhood or geographical area. You should start by contacting your local council to find out where your nearest allotment sites are. Next, the council will either allocate you a plot, or add your name to the waiting list if there are none available. Demand is high in this area, indeed both the Maze Hill and Humber Road allotments have now closed their lists.

It may be difficult to get an allotment immediately, but if you are flexible and prepared to join a waiting list, it will happen. Meanwhile you can take the time to learn about growing fruit and vegetables. You might consider joining a local gardening group where you'll be able to 'pick the brains' of other gardeners.

When you consider taking on a plot, you should be aware that the average allotment space is approximately 250sqm. If you think that is too much for you to cope with on your own ask if you can rent a half plot or share it with a friend.

Allotment costs vary from area to area according to the price of land. The average in the UK is between £30-£40 a year, but rents can be as high as £100 per annum, particularly in the capital. If you are unsuccessful at finding a 'local' allotment, you might consider adjoining boroughs. Help is available through the London Allotments Network which holds a London-wide list of individuals who are looking for plots. If you wish to join the list, visit www.londonallotments.net or email chouse@londonallotments.net.

If you'd like to create a vegetable plot in your own garden, make sure it's as close to the house as possible as it makes it easier to nip out of the kitchen for some ultra-fresh green or herbs for cooking. Choose a sunny spot – south or south-west facing is best; it should be level so that water doesn't run off. If the soil quality is poor add about 30 cm of fresh topsoil from the garden centre.

The easiest crops to grow are potatoes, broad beans, sweetcorn and all varieties of tomato and leeks... off you go!

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