

Planning your allotment

Contributed by Mrs Fiddlesticks

Faced with a new plot in whatever state it comes in, there is a myriad of advice on how to clear it, plant it and rotate it, but that isn't the point of this piece. Believe it or not the first thing you should do once the plot is clear, is plan and dare I use the word 'design' your plot. Strange as it may be to use the word design and allotment in the same sentence it is something you should give some thought to.

I'm not suggesting you need to go all Ground Force on it, it's a productive plot not a garden, after all, and the same rules don't apply (although there is no reason why they can't if that's the effect you want) but making your plot efficient and orderly will make it a pleasurable and safe place to work in and it could increase your yield!! You could draw this plan out if you wish but a broad outline in your head will probably suffice.

The first thing to bear in mind with all this is the rules of your site and any work you do shouldn't contravene this.

But that clear in your head where do you begin? Well first off you need somewhere to store your tools and other bits and pieces, we'll assume for the moment that the previous incumbent hasn't left you a monolith of rotting iron that is supposed to be your shed, and that you're free to pick the right spot for it. It makes sense to site your new shed at what you regard to be the front door of your plot especially if you need to off load things in to it from the car like compost bags or picnic stuff for example. But perhaps there is a shady bit next to a hedge where little will grow so that might be better. Make sure there is room for a water butt or two along side it. If your plot is very long it might even make sense to site the shed in the middle of the plot to shorten the walk to it. If security is an issue then site it in a good visible place as a deterrent. But in your plan allow plenty of 'path' around it for ease of maintenance and safe storage for things like canes and bits of wood, which I would secure in some way to avoid being a danger or menace to other plot holders and yourself. If you keep your heap of Things That Might Be Useful One Day under control, its all-together less of an eyesore.

Next up, the compost bins and other rotting material depots (leaf mould, wormeries, manure heaps or liquid feed container) since they are a potential source of pong it may be wise not to site them near your shed if you envisage sitting on the step with your sarnies in the summer. Neither will you be popular if you site these things by the fence that divides your plot from someone's garden! Furthest corner then possibly. Personally we've put compost bins near our shed as we eat lunch elsewhere on the plot. Site these things as it's convenient for you, so it's not a trudge to use them.

Now the most controversial bit - the actual places you're going to grow the stuff, the reason you have a plot in the first place. There are so many ways of doing this and most garden experts will have a particular favourite from raised beds to bays, squares or just old-fashioned rows. Here is a little guide to the various methods but this isn't meant to be an in depth study.

First off raised beds - usually made from old scaffolding boards and the like - the current favourite. Favoured because you can work from both sides without stepping on the soil, good if your back means a lot of digging or bending isn't possible as some advocate no digging at all. Crops can be spaced much closer together due to the greater depth of soil so you get more out of a smaller space, making it very productive in a small plot. Disadvantages - would take an awful lot of work and potential expense if you had to install raised beds on a very big plot. Worse if you chose to import topsoil for them as well. More paths to maintain. Closer cropping means more vigilance over possible pests and diseases.

Bays - this is the way we've chosen, dividing our 180ft plot in to 20ft long bays. A smaller plot could be in squares for example. Advantages - you can easily plan a crop rotation as similar types of vegetables can be grown in the same bay, and then moved up one etc. It gives a psychological boost to the digging to plan to do one bay in an afternoon say as opposed to the dauntingly long whole plot. Disadvantages - more expensive to net or protect areas if rabbits or other wild animals are a problem. Traditional spacing is needed to allow for plants root systems, so there will be less yield per square of soil than the raised beds. Still some paths to maintain.

Old fashioned rows - the traditional way of viewing an allotment. Advantages few or no paths to maintain, just row upon row of crops. More of the land could be used since there are no paths or other things in the way. Can look really attractive in its simplicity. Disadvantages, you need to be very clear in your head about where things were planted to really make sure you have a sense of rotation in future years. You get to dig all of it!!

Making that decision will as much depend on individual preference as well as ground type, aspect, soil and the crops you want to grow. It is of course possible to combine styles within the same plot, for example having raised beds for say salad crops and perhaps leaving more room for the traditional rows of spuds and beans on the rest of the allotment.

Whatever method you choose there will be paths to add and perhaps before you source the scaffolding you ought to give a thought to this. Even with the traditional row method you may decide that with a wide plot it would be a good idea to have a path running down the centre of the plot to get a wheel barrow right to the end. You can just leave the grass as a path, perfectly good and cheap, but of course it will need mowing periodically; or maybe if there are few weeds bare trampled earth could also work, though you will need to maintain that and I can't personally think of anything more tedious than hoeing a path for an afternoon! We've chosen bark for our paths with a layer of weed suppressing membrane beneath it. It will need topping up periodically and the membrane is no guarantee of lack of weed and in some areas I can see potential mowing being needed. Smaller areas could of course have gravel or paving slabs but both are expensive and heavy to cart around the plot. Spending some time making the paths level whatever you decide is a worthwhile afternoons work however.

There may of course be other things you wish to site on your plot like a greenhouse or poly tunnel if they are permitted and much has been written about the siting of more permanent crops like fruit or asparagus, but this is just a basic introduction to the subject and if nothing else may make you have a think about how you see your plot looking in the years to come. There is no right or wrong way to set out your plot but putting the utilities in the most efficient place and deciding on your method of planting and of course most importantly by looking and understanding your plot - are there shady bits under the hedge that nothing is going to grow in, what direction does it face, where is the prevailing wind the strongest - you will be making a start to getting the most out of the land that you've got.

One final thought on your plan, do make room for a seat won't you so that you can rest with the old tea flask and admire all your hard work.