Trowse Parish Council

Allotment

Handbook

Thinking of applying for an Allotment? Then this is where to start.

**About our sites**

Trowse has two allotment sites. One at Block Hill, Devon Way and the larger at The Dell, White Horse Lane. The Dell also offers half plots.

**How big are the plots?**

There are various sizes but a full-size plot is approx. 25m x 5m and half plots are approx. 11m x 5m.

**How long does it take to get an allotment?**

That is a very tricky question to answer. There is generally an annual turnover of plots but that cannot be guaranteed. People do vacate plots during the course of a year so depending on how long the waiting list is you may get a plot quite quickly. The plots on The Dell are more popular but if you are just starting out and want a smaller plot then Block Hill might be for you. Once you are on the waiting list the parish clerk will periodically update you as to your position on the list.

**What facilities do the allotments have?**

Both sites have access to running water and most plots have sheds/greenhouses already installed. If on a half plot, you may share a shed/greenhouse with another occupant. The Dell has a communal plot which has a “share shed” and a seating area.

**Is there disabled access?**

There is no specific access for disabled people or those with mobility issues on either site. Given the nature of the entrance to Block Hill it is not thought that site would be not suitable for those with additional mobility needs. If you have mobility issues but still want an allotment, The Dell would be the better site for you. You can make raised beds on your plot to facilitate easier planting etc and make allowances for wheelchair users on your own plot pathways.

**What should I do first?**

This depends on when you take over a plot. Gardening is a seasonal activity, which roughly goes as follows: preparing the ground in the autumn and winter, planting in the spring and summer and harvesting in summer and autumn.

Often by the time the plot is re-let and because of the inevitable delays between the previous tenant giving up the plot, and the new tenant taking over, the weeds have grown and the first job is clearing the ground.

The alternative courses of action are as follows:

1. Strim or scythe the grass and weeds, then dig it over gradually, keeping the remaining grass and weeds cut down in the meantime. In severe cases, the parish clerk will arrange to have the plot trimmed before you start. The excess material can be composted. The remaining vegetation can be dug into the plot by turning it over spade by spade, the roots will be exposed to the sun in the summer and the frost in the winter, and will die off. The green foliage under the surface will rot down giving valuable humus to the soil. Air will be able to break down the soil and keep it sweet. Digging is heavy work, and it is suggested that you dig small areas at a time, to bring that area into cultivation, before tackling the rest of the plot.

2. Using a rotavator can save time, provided that you can dig deep enough, and you do not have perennial weeds on the plot. Rotovating those will merely break up the roots, and spread them, thus giving rise to greater future problems.

3. TPC prohibit the use of chemical weed killers and these should not be used under any circumstances.

4. No plant is able to grow without light and water and most will die off eventually if light is excluded. Cardboard or permeable woven plastic is OK provided it is weighted down. Note the permeable plastic does fray and should be sealed on its edges, perhaps with gaffer tape. Impermeable black plastic not recommended. The use of carpet is also not permitted as they are unsightly, will not rot down, and are an ideal habitat for slugs and snails which will breed quite happily and feed on your and your neighbour’s young crops and seedlings.

5. Any covering will prevent birds from clearing grubs and insects for you, and thus covering the ground is only recommended in the autumn and winter.

**Once I have prepared some ground, what should I plant?**

Most things you might grow are readily available, fresh or frozen and nowadays pretty well all through the year. The attractions of growing your own produce are:

* The satisfaction of producing your own food or flowers by your own efforts
* The taste and freshness of vegetables and fruit picked and eaten on the same day
* Growing varieties that are not available in most shops
* Growing unusual fruit and vegetables that are not generally available
* Growing things from tiny seeds to complete plants, an almost magical process
* Fresh air, exercise, a new interest and meeting new people

Grow things you like to eat. This sounds obvious, but it is easy to be swayed by advertising, friends, advice given into growing things that are easy, but you don’t actually want to eat!

If you are a first-time gardener the easiest things to grow are generally those with large seeds such as potatoes, beans, onions from sets. Beetroot and salad leaves are also easy to grow and, in the case of salad leaves, produce a crop very quickly.

Buying in plants is a good idea for some things. Tomatoes, courgettes and squash plants are sold ready to plant out and are also easy to look after once they are large plants. Cabbages, broccoli, cauliflower are readily available as plants and are easy to grow except for the pigeons who love them. (See pests and diseases below.) Your fellow plot holders may have a surplus of young plants that they are willing to share. Sharing this way can save waste.

Perennial cutting flowers such as dahlias are useful, because they can be picked for the house, they attract pollinators, and the roots can be left in the ground over winter as long as they are protected from frost by a covering of cow manure. They will require staking in the summer. Comfrey is a good plant to grow on the border of your plot, as it attracts pollinators when flowering, and when cut down after flowering, can be put into a bucket of water to produce a very good liquid feed. Other perennials such as foxgloves will multiply naturally and spread seeds to other plots, so should be avoided.

Soft fruit such as raspberries, black currants, red currants, gooseberries, grow well, and only require mulching, annual pruning and being kept weed free. They are good value for money. Rhubarb is easy to grow, and if manured over the winter, will produce good quantities of shoots during most of the summer.

The size of the plots will enable you to grow some soft fruit, and give sufficient area to rotate your crops in order to avoid diseases such as onion rot or cabbage root fly taking hold in a particular area. You could set aside an area for herbs especially perennials such as parsley, thyme or rosemary.

**How much work do I need to do on the plot?**

Once a plot is in good order, this will vary by season. In the depths of winter, when not much is growing, you do not need and probably won’t want to spend a lot of time there. In spring and summer when things are growing quickly and weeding and watering are needed you will need, and hopefully want, to spend a lot more time there. The suggested time is about an hour per metre per week over the year, so about 5 hours a week for a 5-metre plot averaged out over the year.

The most important thing is to go regularly and do something each time you visit. Although not much grows in the winter, some things, like grass and many weeds, grow all year round. A bit of effort each week is so much better than trying to get it all done in Feb/March ready for planting. When it is cold and wet, digging will warm you up! Regular hoeing of tiny weeds is much easier, less time consuming, and more enjoyable than having to dig over large clumps of weeds or grass because you have let the plot get out of hand.

**What tools should I buy?**

A spade, a fork, a rake, a hoe and a trowel are the essentials to work on the ground effectively. You should also buy a stone to sharpen your hoe, since this is the best way of weeding. Again, if you are unsure of how to use any of your tools, do ask other plot holders. None of these tools has to be new. Good second-hand tools can be bought from charity shops and found in car boot sales.

If you have an allotment shed, it is advisable not to leave expensive items or power tools in the shed because of potential theft. There are two schools of thought re padlocking sheds. The first is not to lock, on the assumption that once potential thieves have had a look in and decided there is nothing of value worth taking, they will move on.

The second school of thought is that if a shed is locked, the potential thief will believe that there is something valuable in there, and break down the door. If there is nothing of value, you will not lose anything, but will have a broken door. All instances of theft should be reported to the local police and the parish clerk.

It is possible to mark your valuable tools using the Smartwater system. This is an invisible ink which shows up under ultraviolet light. Shops taking second hand goods are linked into the system as are the police. The scheme is promoted by the police and regular visits to mark tools have been organised over the past few years.

**What are the main pests and diseases?**

Pests are things like pigeons and beetles. Diseases are things like rot and mould. This brief introduction cannot cover all the possible pests and diseases you might see. However, some important principles are worth remembering:

* Something is likely to want to eat or destroy most things you grow at some point.
* Plants are particularly vulnerable to pests and diseases when they are young.
* Healthy plants which are well fed and watered are much less likely to suffer from pests and diseases.
* The quicker you identify what is attacking your plant, the more chance you have of dealing with it successfully.
* Fleece and Enviromesh, can help to protect plants from bird and insect attack.

Some plants need protection all their lives. Pigeons are likely to strip brassicas such as cabbages and other green leafy vegetables at any time of year, though they particularly like young plants and new growth in the spring. Netting or fleece is essential for these vegetables.

Soft fruit such as strawberries, redcurrants, raspberries and gooseberries will be the target for birds, once the fruit ripens. A fruit cage or netting on tall posts using upturned small plastic pots on top to prevent the netting snagging, will keep the birds away from the fruit, and can be removed once the fruit has been picked. The netting mesh should be large enough to allow pollinators to reach the strawberry plants or fruit bushes, if you net them early.

Slugs and snails will destroy young seedlings very quickly, particularly when the weather is wet. Again, seedlings need protection. Slug pellets have a mixed press, accused of poisoning birds and other wildlife by some and safe by others. They are not 100% effective and ‘slug pubs’ are certainly as effective though more time consuming to set up. Once bought however they are cheap to use. Keeping your plot free of covered or dense weedy areas, will discourage slugs and snails.

Aphids such as greenfly and blackfly don’t usually kill plants, but stunt their growth, especially blackfly on the tips of broad bean plants. They are easily controlled in the early stages by spraying affected plants with washing up liquid diluted as you would for a bowl of greasy dishes, or approved insecticides in solution, mixed with a little washing up liquid to improve the adherence to the plant foliage. Alternatively, the tips of the broad bean plants can be nipped off by hand before the blackfly take hold.

Leeks suffer from leek moth, and the maggots burrow down the centre of the stem. The stems start looking limp, and you can see the channels of the larvae down the centre of the plant.Cut off all the leaves just below where the maggots have penetrated, and the plant will continue to grow. You may have to do this more than once. Alternatively use a proprietary pest control, or grow under raised arches covered with Enviromesh or fleece.

Carrots suffer from carrot fly. Avoid by growing under raised arches covered with Enviromesh or fleece, or grow in a cold frame with sides at least 24 inches high. The theory is that the pests fly close to the ground, and on reaching an obstacle rise up and fly over the top of your young carrots.

Although they have not often been seen, it is probably badgers and/or deer that decimate the sweet corn plants, just as the cobs are almost ripe. A stout, well anchored wire fence is required to keep these powerful animals at bay!

Tomatoes grown outside a greenhouse, can suffer blight if there is a lot of wet weather, and as they are the same genus as potatoes; if potatoes suffer blight. With tomatoes, the leaves turn black as well as the fruit, and the advice is to cut out all the affected leaves to see if that stops the problem. With potatoes, cut down the stalks immediately, hoping that the potatoes have grown enough to harvest straight away. The potatoes stalks and the tomato plants should be taken off site and burned or taken to re-cycling. (There, pests and diseases on plants are destroyed by heat treatment.) This disease is highly contagious as the spores are wind-blown, and other plot holders can be easily affected if you do not take action quickly enough.

Strawberries will suffer slug and snail damage, and will get soil damaged if left on bare soil. A good solution is to lay down some black weed cover which is permeable, and make round cut outs for the plants. This prevents weeds growing between the plants and tends to discourage slugs and snails.

Weeds inevitably grow on all plots, especially on uncultivated ground. Regular hoeing with a sharp-edged hoe is the easiest way to keep on top of them. They are most difficult to deal with when they have been left for a few weeks in the growing season. Even perennial weeds will weaken and eventually die if the new growth is regularly cut off. Hoeing also aerates and exposes the soil, allowing birds to feed on grubs etc. Let the birds do the work!

Crop rotation, or growing particular crops on different areas of your plot from year to year, helps to avoid soil diseases. Keep a plan for each year.

**How do I deal with perennial weeds?**

Convolvulus (Bindweed), couch grass, and ground elder are commonly found on plots. They can be individually treated with weed killers, but the roots are usually widespread, and do not kill off easily. You can try and carefully dig down and follow the roots to remove them intact, but any small piece of root left in the soil will continue to grow. Oxalis leaves look similar to clover, but if you dig down deep enough, you will find a cluster of tiny bulbs that will remain in the soil if you pull out the top leaves. Try and remove all the bulbs (they will break up and fall out of your hand very easily). One small bulb left in, will grow!

Dispose of these weeds either to re-cycling, or only if your compost gets hot enough, put them in your compost, if you are willing to take the risk. Hot composting as it is known will be hot enough to kill all weed seeds and roots of perennials. You will need to investigate how to do this. It is not complex but does involve turning the compost regularly to ensure that the process of decomposition happens quickly. Most people just rely on adding compostable materials to their compost bin and waiting for it to decompose. In winter this can take months but is much quicker in the summer when it is warmer.

**Still interested?**

Please fill in the below form and return it to:

Trowse Parish Council

The Manor Rooms

The Street

Trowse

NR14 8ST

**Allotment Enquiry Form**

Name: Address:

Email : Daytime phone number:

**Please ensure details are correct before posting. Or alternatively email the Parish Clerk at** trowsepc@outlook.com