Leytonstone Allotment Holders Association

Guidance sheet

Reclaiming an overgrown plot



Planning.

Make a plan of action. What this is will very much depend on what your new plot is overgrown with and how easy it is to see any wood/metal/assorted items in the undergrowth. If it is difficult to see everything, perhaps consider dividing the plot into patches and clearing these one at a time. Many plots and/or sheds do come with an existing collection of junk. It is often best to start afresh rather than trying to re-use items left behind, because most people vacating a plot will have taken anything worthwhile away with them anyway.

Clearing.

If the plot is largely covered in grass, there are a number of clearance strategies you could follow and these can be mixed and matched depending on how much time you have in any given month and whether you want to follow an entirely organic growing regime.

Grassed land can simply be dug over, turning the clods upside down in the digging trench and leaving the grass to rot into the soil. This will need to be done repeatedly as perennial grasses don't give up easily. After the first couple of diggings the soil should be broken up enough for it to be possible to weed out the grass roots when digging. At this point it will also probably be possible to use a rotavators. Patches can be covered with groundcover fabric to exclude light from the grass and weeds. This will not kill grass entirely, but it will do for the leaves and give you a head start when you come to dig the area. Weed killer (roundup or some other non-persistent glyphosate type) can be applied using a watering can. This will definitely kill grass and most other weeds, but care needs to be taken that it doesn't get on the paths or your neighbour's plots. Especial care needs to be taken when getting water to make it up from concentrate so as not to contaminate the water tanks – always use a separate clean can for fetching water.

If the plot has a lot of brambles, a different approach will be needed for these. The first job is to cut down all growth to ground level and chop it into manageable lengths. This can be done by hand or using a brushcutter (most strimmers will not cope with bramble stems). Pile the cut bramble somewhere to dry out ready for burning once bonfire season comes around. The roots that remain will have to be manually dug out and burned also, because if they are dug in or composted they will just regrow.

Bindweed is sadly fairly unaffected by weed killer, loves being dug in and thrives if chopped up by a rotavator. The only solution to this pest is to wage long term warfare by removing the leaves as soon as they appear to weaken the plant and taking out as much of the roots as possible every time you dig.

Self-seeded thorn or tree saplings will need cutting down and burning like bramble, but this will usually need to be done by hand. Once cut down, the stumps should be treated with a non-persistent weedkiller and left to die off. Eventually they will rot away, or alternatively they can be dug out and burnt.

Rubbish.

A useful strategy is to designate one area in which to store all the rubbish waiting to be disposed of until you have a chance to take it to the dump. Bag up anything small enough to fit in rubble sacks (there is nothing as annoying as picking up your bag later to take away and finding it has biodegraded), and gather together everything that needs to go. This way it will be possible to see exactly how much there is to dispose of while making it easier to move around the rest of the plot.

The possibility of broken glass on the plot or in the soil is an unfortunate fact of life on old established sites, so when clearing overgrown areas or breaking up clods of soil on a newly acquired plot it is always advisable to wear gloves.

Roding Farm does not have a rubbish collection service. Members are strongly encouraged to compost green material where possible. General rubbish and plastics should be taken off site to be disposed of.

Bonfires are not allowed on site.

Internal paths on the plot.

Please do not lay any carpet, underlay or roofing felt to make internal paths on a plot, and if you are unfortunate enough to inherit a plot where these materials have been used, please remove them. These materials contain pollutants and should not be in contact with soil. Suitable alternative materials are either horticultural groundcover fabrics or the woodchip provided free on site.

Improving your soil.

The soil at Roding farm is very fertile, but because it is a clay soil it will become compacted and heavy to work if not cultivated regularly. Where this happens, winter rainfall will also not be able to easily drain away and the earth may become waterlogged in places. Regular digging and addition of manure and compost are essential to prevent this and maintain the soil.

Making compost and manure bins on the plot provides somewhere to dispose of the weeds being cleared and somewhere to store manure in advance so it is ready for when needed. The simplest and cheapest way to make bins is to tie together pallets. This gives an ideal sized space to fill, costs nothing, and can be moved about easily if you decide to relocate it. It is also worth investing in some groundcover fabric to go under bins so that weeds cannot grow up into the compost or manure.

The manure delivered to site is provided free for the use of all members, but is fresh and does need to be stored and left to rot down for a minimum of 10-12 weeks before it can be dug in or spread.

Weeds, grass and uncooked vegetable waste from the kitchen all make wonderful compost if left to rot away in a bin. Try to keep the contents well mixed and consider adding a sprinkling of compost accelerator from time to time. Keep the bin contents packed down and when it is full, cover it up with a sheet and start another one. In around a year you will have your own free compost to dig in and enrich your soil.

It sounds obvious, but don't try to do too much at once. An allotment is always a long term project and nobody is expected to be able to work miracles.



Everyone who takes on a new plot has 3 months grace allowed to start to get things under control, which doesn't mean the plot has to be perfect in three months, just that you need to be working on it regularly and continually.

Committee members and fellow plotholders are always ready to help with advice, and

Committee members are guaranteed to be around to speak to every Sunday morning between 10am and 12pm.

See future advice on the website with regard to:

- permitted sheds & greenhouses
- planting fruit trees
- composting