TAMING AN OVERGROWN ALLOTMENT

Some advice which may be applicable to your situation – take the bits which work for you. Every site is different, every gardener has different needs, abilities and resources.

Clearing

Allotments are big, too big for most people to dig over and clear in a weekend. Start by clearing a manageable part at first, even just a tenth, maybe also see if a friend would like to share both the work and the produce with you. A small area well-tended is more productive and fun than a larger, weedy and half empty space.

The bit which you are going to prepare for immediate use requires careful digging to remove the main bulk of perennial roots, after any rampant growth has been cut off. Small side roots of nettles will not regrow but most others need removing in their entirety, couch grass and bindweed especially. If you have time, a secondary passage after two or three weeks with a trowel, to remove roots that are still growing, will be worthwhile.

If rotovating to cut up weeds and gain a mechanical tilth, remember that chopped up roots of many perennial weeds will regrow. Just occasionally, if rotovation is done at the onset of a long dry spell of weather, these roots may shrivel and die. If it stays damp after rotovating, many perennial roots will need removing, so in damp conditions rotovating does not help in removing perennial weeds.

Bedmaking - compost

With clean soil you could make some beds of any size by simply putting compost or well rotted manure on top. What compost or manure? I can’t advise for every situation, sometimes municipalities sell ‘green waste compost’, sometimes not. There may be a local stables but you need to find a car (or tractor) and trailer to bring in enough manure, preferably dark and well rotted.

Organic farmers don’t usually sell manure – they need it all and value it too highly – and there have been problems with contaminated manure from non organic farms. It has been realised, too late, that some animal dung contains herbicide from their diet of treated grass or hay. so try asking questions of your source like “was the feed grass sprayed with aminopyralid herbicide?” Yes we live in a rotten world!

It is mostly horse manure that has this problem, because horse owners like clean hay.

Bedmaking - sides

Beds with compost on are often bordered with wood of 6” (15cm) width, but this is not obligatory. Enclosed beds are clearly defined and look neater, but their edges can dry out more in summer than unbordered beds where compost is allowed to spill slightly into pathways. It is not wasted because roots feed into paths and also use them as a moisture resource.

A further issue with wooden sides is how they harbour slugs and woodlice, especially as they begin to age and decay. You can save money and trouble by not using them but paths then need to be more weed-free, so that weeds don’t spread into beds. I use carboard to
mulch paths for 6-9 months, enough time to kill most weeds. You need to put more cardboard on top every three months, before weeds can grow through the older, decaying cardboard.

Timings
If your compost is soft and even, you can sow or plant straightaway. Otherwise it works well to make beds at least a month before starting to sow or plant, so that a little weathering can happen and perhaps a first flush of weeds can be hoed off or hand weeded.

Is it your first time growing vegetables? If so, take a good look around at how neighbours are doing, and what crops are growing well. Be prepared for some failures until you have enough experience to appreciate what works for you.

Mulching
The uncultivated remainder of your space could be mown or scythed and then covered with black polythene or old, wool carpet. Cardboard can be used but will decompose before perennial weeds such as couch grass, docks, dandelions and buttercup are dead, so it will need renewing every 2 months or so, depending how thick it is. When used for clearing ground, cardboard is best weighed down with a few stones or poles around its edges.

Perennial weeds that are mulched take different lengths of time to die off, according to how much food and energy they have stored in their roots. The following lengths of time in complete darkness are to give you an idea: stinging nettles and buttercup 2-3 months, dandelions 4 months, ground elder 6 months, couch grass 9-15 months, bindweed and mares tail 18 months plus. These are approximate numbers, times can be less in summer and more in winter.

If you are faced with only annual weeds (bliss!), cardboard is still useful as the first layer of a weed free mulch, with 3-4” compost on top which can be sown or planted into.

Maintenance
From two to six inches of compost is the one-off, initial application. Once a no dig system is up and running, with perennial weeds gone and only vegetables growing, the annual application of organic matter is no greater than on any other well run garden, about 1-2” per annum. It is to keep soil alive and healthy, as well as for the nutrients it brings in. All the soil fauna and fungi that are not damaged by digging can become more abundant and help plants to grow more healthily.

Putting compost and composted manure on top serves to create, over time, a soil that is well structured but firm, free draining but also moisture retentive, and darker on top, with a superficial tilth that can be sown or planted into. This approach works well even for carrots and parsnips, crops that are supposed to fork when compost or manure has been added. Potatoes are the only vegetable I know which prefer loose, mechanically disturbed soil, but only near the surface for their tubers to swell, and “earthing-up” with compost replicates this.
It is a fair job to mulch and set up a clean, no dig plot, but by the end of a year you should find gardening becomes more enjoyable and creative, with less of the routine weeding above all. Just do not allow any of the (smaller) number of weeds to go to seed!