

I just got a plot, how to get started?

What has to be done?

You join an allotment garden group. Normally your plot was already cultivated by a gardener before you. If you are new to gardening, your immediate neighbours will be able to tell you about the persistent plants, which are already in the garden. There may already be aromatic plants (thyme, mint) or others such as sorrel and rhubarb, flowers and other plants that you do not yet know. These gardeners can help you while getting started in the garden. They will make you benefit from their experience and knowledge.

Go and see them, observe their gardens, listen to their advice, ask questions, both about gardening, but also about the functioning of the allotment garden group that welcomes you.

Gardening is not a sprint, but a long distant race. In the garden one has to respect the cycle of nature, the four seasons. Remember that you are going to garden for a whole year, on a continuous rhythm and if possible, without jolts. Plan your work and limit the periods of hard work according to your abilities. If you love and respect nature, your work will be easier. Otherwise, watch out for back pain, body aches and blisters.

For gardening you do not need complex tools, a fork (grelinette) to loosen the soil, a claw to break the clods and a rake to level the ground. Buy high quality tools, good and solid. It is better to have less of them than many fragile and useless tools. They will accompany you for many years, allowing you to work while respecting the structure of the soil.

Normally when you arrive in the winter season, this is the correct time to prepare the ground. The ground is often covered with grass. This vegetation is detrimental to the next harvests and has to be removed and composted. It will be later used to feed the plants. Herbs with tough roots (bind weed and quack grass for example) are not to be put to the composter as such. Let them dry in a corner of the garden.

Regular work with a fork (grelinette) will allow you to obtain a favourable support for a quick growing of your fruit and vegetables. Your plot should not remain uncovered for a long time before putting in the seeds or the plants. Think of mulching and green manures that will prevent leaching and soil compaction. A few weeks later, before planting, it will be sufficient to crush the plant cover and introduce it into the soil. You will then have a soil with enriched nutrition for your future vegetables. Do not wait for spring and sunny days to do all this, your land must be ready to welcome your seedling at the right time. They must

not be in competition with unwanted plants that, well established, will have the upper hand when your vegetables want to grow.

Even if the weather is cloudy, a passage in the garden is necessary for two reasons:

- It is better to work a little bit from time to time, than to try to do everything in one day.
- You should meet your neighbours, observe your garden regularly, watch the evolution of nature and the rain level, check the general condition of the equipment, clean them etc.

In short acquire good habits that will then facilitate your gardener's life.

In the garden, the secret of success is the right plant, put in the right place at the right time and grown in good conditions.

This you should not do.

- Buy plants or seeds that are not adapted to the region or are of poor quality,
- Not respect the good exposure in the garden plot (sun or shade),
- Sow too early in the season (a too low temperature for germination or frost will damage the plants),
- Sow too late (cycle too short to harvest),
- Not to work the plot enough (unwanted weeds, compact soil that prevents normal growth),
- Water too little (difficult recovery of the plants) or on the contrary water in excess (diseases, wastefulness),
- Not to regularly monitor garden crops (hoeing, pruning, observation of diseases and pests).

In the kitchen garden do not forget the floral part that allows the welcoming of auxiliaries and useful insects (as for example pollinators and predators of pest) but also provides well-being and pleasant sensations. Leave a little bit of nature, but also associate some plants which each other.

All this you can discover from your garden friends, but also by reading regularly the national allotment reviews.

Olivier Guérin & Jean-Claude Férial