

CHAPTER 1

Getting Started

So, you're thinking of making that call to the local allotment committee ...

I remember making my call. I'd just moved to a little riverside town in Essex called Burnham-on-Crouch. It was 2007, and I'd been inspired by the original *River Cottage* series, which I thought was absolutely the best thing I'd ever seen on telly.

Declaring my intentions to my sceptical then-girlfriend-now-wife Ailsa, I took myself off for a sneaky walk around the allotments. I'm not afraid to admit that the experience was all rather intoxicating. Spring was upon us, the sun shone and the plots were full of people sowing, planting and preparing their allotments for summer. I had a chat with a very friendly chap about his plot, and went home to make The Call.

The Call can be quite daunting. You're an outsider. Generally, you're ringing someone on the committee, such as the chairman. They're the allotment Big Cheese. Ron, the Burnham head honcho at the time, was no exception. He was brief, to the point and said he'd be in touch when something came up.

I was very lucky. The Burnham waiting list was short, and one nice plot holder heard that I wanted a plot. He had two, but was struggling to run them both. After waiting about a month, I got a call from Ron. I was to meet him the coming Saturday at 9.30 a.m.

Plot 105

Saturday came, and I made my way to the allotment shop. At the back of the shop stood a tall, white-haired man. He had his back to me, fiddling with some bamboo canes.

I cleared my throat. ‘Er, Ron?’

Ron continued to fiddle with his canes. ‘Yep.’

‘I’m here to look at a plot. Jonathan, from Crouch Road?’

‘Yep.’

Still Ron fiddled with the canes.

I waited for a minute or so before Ron finally turned round and checked me out. I got the feeling he was as dubious as my wife.

We took the short walk to Plot 105, passing Ron’s exemplary allotment on the way. Ron and his wife, I was to learn, were allotment stalwarts of forty-odd years. They were now in charge of day-to-day running of the plots, the annual show and introducing upstarts like me to their new allotment.

To my untrained eyes, Plot 105 looked all right. It needed tidying up, for sure. There were big piles of soil and weeds that had been piled up, but there was potential. Ron talked me through the rules in his gruff, to-the-point manner, before telling me to have a think about it and let him know.

I lent up against the rickety old shed. There it was. Plot 105. Ready and waiting, if I still wanted it ...

Now, this begs the question: did I still want it? Of course, the answer was yes. However, things were a lot easier then. I was twenty-six, with no children or anything else that might take up my time.

I’m thirty-five now, married with two wonderful but rather wilful children. If Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall came bounding along now, with his floppy hair and earthy recipes, would I still take on an allotment?

I’ve had eight amazing years on two different plots, running my own and then helping my mum with hers. Growing my own veg has been life changing. I’d absolutely, completely and wholeheartedly still take on an allotment, but I’d ponder these eight things first ...

1. *Decide why you want to run an allotment*

This is possibly the most important thing to think about, as you’ll need a certain amount of drive. Allotments are fantastic, but they do need to become part of your life rather than something you live around; they require a commitment.

So, are you taking on your allotment to reduce your food miles or gain more control over what you eat? Are you trying to save money, or is it something to do to relax? Maybe it’s the chance to grow something you might not find in the shops, or perhaps you just want to eat the tastiest, freshest fruit and veg possible?

You will need to remember this focus when you’re struggling for the motivation to get down there.

2. *Ease yourself in*

Take your time and assess what's in front of you – it's okay to have empty beds! If you're worried about time and commitment, just grow a few things in your first year and go from there. Be realistic and you won't find yourself chasing your tail all the time. Half a dozen great harvests are much better for spirits, taste buds and wallets than a load of plants that have struggled because you've not had the time to look after them all.

3. *Work out how much time you can spare*

Are you generally busy Saturday mornings? When can you make the time to get down to your plot?

If you're short on time, can you work the plot with a friend? When I first took mine on, I had my mum's help, and a friend of mine works her plot with both her mum and her aunt. Another friend has a whole plot, but has given half over to a work colleague. Be realistic about how much time you'll really want to spend on the allotment.

4. *What do you want to grow?*

Don't worry about the things you don't eat many of. There's no pressure to grow loads of cauliflowers or sprouts just because you suddenly have the space. You should treat yourself to the fruit and veg you really love. A neighbour at my plots grows only soft fruit in summer, and then puts the patch to bed for the winter.

Remember, if you're really excited about the crops you're growing, you'll find the time to do the work you need to.

5. *Get online*

TV programmes are great for fuelling the passion, but they are entertainment. Blogs are realistic, and show crops dying, untidy plots and what happens when you go on holiday.

It's also worth watching some vlogs on YouTube. Again, these show real plot holders, working allotments alongside all the other stuff we have going on in our lives. And Twitter's great for getting in touch with other gardeners to exchange tips.

6. *How accessible is your plot?*

The key to a well-run allotment is little and often. Can you get there quickly and easily? Falling behind means long days catching up, and this can turn the plot into a chore and get you down.

7. *Don't take things too seriously – it's meant to be fun!*

If you're not enjoying yourself, give up and look at growing another way. There is nothing wrong with doing this!

Growing veg is a truly marvellous hobby, but to get the most from it you've got to enjoy what you're doing. A small, manageable and successful patch is much more satisfying than a scruffy allotment plot that you haven't time to look after.

Can you get creative with your space at home instead? Maybe in your front garden (like Naomi from outofmyshed.co.uk), on a balcony (check out Mark from verticalveg.co.uk) or growing up a wall in the backyard (see Alexandra's examples on www.rhs.org.uk/advice/grow-your-own/containers/veg-on-walls).



8. Could you grow just as effectively in your garden?

This is a biggie, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, after making The Call, you might actually find yourself on a waiting list that, quite literally, could run into years. Allotments are highly sought after in urban areas particularly, and prices are sneaking up too. If you want to grow vegetables this side of the next century, you might have no choice but to look elsewhere.

If this is the case and you're lucky enough to have a garden, could you make use of the space you have there? Is there a corner that you could turn over to designated veg beds? You might not have as much space to use for veggies, but it is surprising how much can be crammed into a small area.

Secondly, does growing in your garden suit your lifestyle better? A kitchen garden is undoubtedly more

convenient and time-friendly than an allotment. Being able to pop out the back door and be straight in among your plants is very handy, and makes even ten minutes' work worthwhile.

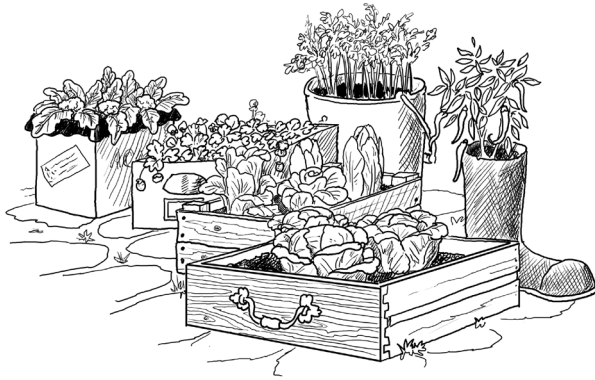
I started growing in my garden when my first child was born. My beds then were small, but that made managing my time much easier and I could split my sessions into little and often. My eldest, Lewis, now four, comes and helps me until he is bored and then just goes back into the house. If I took him to the allotment, I'd be facing a tantrum when I refused to take him home to watch *Patr* *Patrol* after half an hour!

Don't just limit yourself to the back garden, though. I've seen some really lovely vegetable gardens out the front of houses, particularly in cities where space is at a premium. And don't rule out making use of patios and balconies, either. Growing food in these spaces is a developing trend in urban areas, as they're normally small but sunny spaces perfect for container plants, such as tomatoes, salads, herbs and even dwarf pea and bean varieties.

Container plants need lots of water as they dry out quicker than those in the ground, and although the soil can be expensive, containers are easily found for free. I use old recycling boxes that my local council are throwing away and are the perfect size for most veg, if a little ugly.

Wine boxes are perfect for salad leaves, and old drawers make quirky but practical growing containers. Even cardboard boxes will support plants sufficiently for a season if lined inside with plastic layering.

Although these are the most common places for growing your own food, there are other options available too. If you don't have anywhere suitable, you might be able to rent or borrow a slice of land from someone else, maybe



a neighbour or even at work. A group of my colleagues set up a gardening club in the courtyard outside our office and grew flowers as well as veg in the beds.

Ten Reasons to Take on an Allotment

Now for some parity. The last thing I want to do is put you off an allotment before we've even passed Chapter One!

There is loads of information around about the benefits of growing your own fruit and veg. People far more eloquent than I will ever be have done an excellent job of explaining how the taste of homegrown food far outstrips that of shop-bought alternatives, and, of course, there are the other obvious positives, such as reduction of food miles and the chance to harvest truly delicious food at its very freshest.

These things are obvious, so I won't go over old ground. Instead, I'll give you ten other less obvious reasons for renting an allotment.

1. Extra space

If you want to grow lots and lots of fruit and veg, then an allotment will give most of us much more space than our gardens will. This is particularly useful if you're growing for a family, but also if you want to grow extra for freezing or storing. It also allows you room to be indulgent and grow loads of your favourites, like strawberry plants or fruit bushes.

2. Community

Growing in your garden can be lonely, especially if you're a sociable type. There are always plenty of people at the allotments to chat to, as well as summer shows and events. If you're lucky, you'll find yourself on a really friendly plot, where afternoon cups of tea and cake are the norm.

3. Cheap

Allotments are a bargain. At an average of £30 per year, they're probably cheaper to run than your garden. My rent was £18 a year, and I can't think of a better way to have spent that money.

4. Tips from others

Allotment holders are friendly folk, and from my experience they're always willing to pass on tips and advice to newcomers. Each allotment site will have many long-standing members, who have worked their plots for a number of years. You could fit what they don't know about growing in your soil on the back of a seed packet.