



How to plan, prepare, start & end activities at a school allotment

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A quick guide to share suggestions of how to get young people engaged with activities on a regular basis



It's very common for sessions at a secondary school allotment to take place during an incredibly short lunchtime or at the end of a busy school day. Let's be honest, for many teachers getting things planned, prepared and ready at their school allotment for young people in these limited windows of the school day, is really an addition on top of everything teachers must get right!

This simple guide has been put together to share recommended thoughts and ideas on how to help teachers, or any adult for that matter, to get the most out of their allotment sessions. At the end of the day, it's absolutely essential that young people are gaining good and positive experiences. It's important to also remember that at this level of gardening, it really doesn't have to be complicated. It should be very much grassroot level gardening that must be enjoyable for young people. It's all about achieving that all-important good experience that the young people will remember.



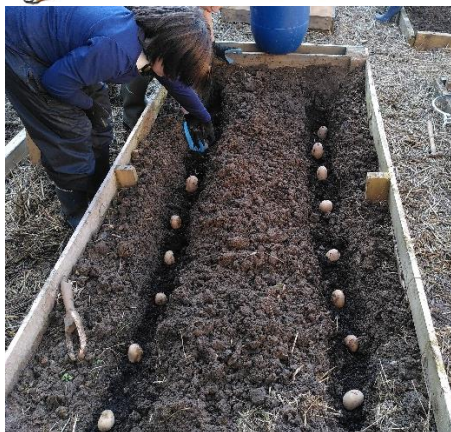
As teachers know, planning is a key part of teaching and deciding what lessons are to be taught, and how, takes up a great deal of teacher's time, especially if you are teaching all day! This is just the same with school gardening. There are two main types of planning, **long** (seasonal & strategic) **term** and **short** (daily & weekly) **term**.

Seasonal and strategical planning:

Having a seasonal and strategical plan is a really sensible idea. Some schools have monthly plans to guide them throughout the year and often local volunteers, with their horticulture knowledge, can advise the teacher they support with this too. It's often good to think about your school allotment in **three** blocks, using the seasons **themselves for guidance too:**

- 1) **Allotment wake-up!** This can start taking place after February half-term, at the earliest, and certainly before spring itself arrives. Use this time to also discuss with your young people what you would like to grow this year. This will determine what beds and growing spaces you make ready for the growing season.
- 2) **The growing season!** Around March to early April is the ideal time to start planting certain things such as early potatoes, broad beans (but always do your own research to make sure or ask a knowledgeable volunteer). As spring arrives and the weather gets warmer you can start to grow more plants, but don't plant out actual plants too early as the frost could catch you out! It's often agreed, by the last week of May, you can plant anything out at your allotment. It's also very important to either plant things early so they can be ready before young people break for summer, or later, just before the summer holidays, so produce can be ready when school returns come September. The growing season can last up to October half-term.





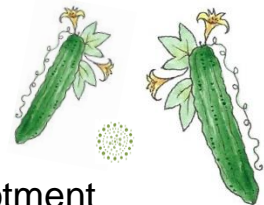
3) **Putting your allotment to bed!** In the weeks building up to the October half-term you aim to harvest everything and celebrate all that has been grown at your allotment. Once everything is harvested from the beds, it's a good idea to start to replenish the soil, which will be tired after being used for growing, with manure or compost. This can be achieved by just adding a layer, no more than a few inches, on top; there's no need to dig it into the soil. After a layer of manure or compost has been added, you should then literally put your growing spaces to bed by covering them with plastic sheeting or a layer of natural mulch (straw is ideal). Whatever you put on top will help keep in all the moisture, prevent weed growth and lock in all the goodness which makes the soil healthy. When you get to February half-term you can reawaken your allotment and the cycle begins again!

Daily & weekly planning

Once your seasonal and strategic plan is ready and guides you with the 'big picture' of what needs to happen throughout the year, you can then decide what daily or weekly tasks need to be done, but what's the best way to get things ready? What's the best way to plan activities at an allotment on a weekly and daily basis?

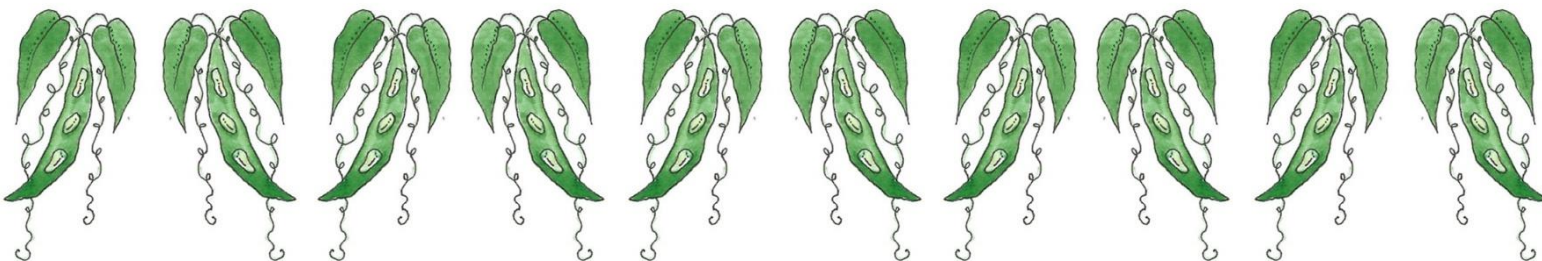


Having a clear plan is absolutely essential!



Generally speaking, most secondary schools tend to run one or two allotment sessions a week, but this depends on the size of the allotment and how much there is to do! Regardless of size, making a super clear weekly and daily plan is absolutely paramount to successful and impactful sessions with young people. Local volunteers should also be invited to help create weekly and daily plans. Here are some suggestive ways you can **communicate** your planning:

- **What's on the weekly menu?** Having a rough weekly plan of the core tasks that need doing will certainly make the daily planning much easier. Jobs like watering and weeding, especially in summer, would always be core tasks along with harvesting produce, when ready! You might decide that there are some 'mini-projects' to be done each week like creating a new composting area, painting the shed, tool audit or planting some fruit trees. These key and crucial tasks should be communicated to all adults involved in your project each week (email is probably best).
- **And today's specials are?** Using a movable blackboard and washable non-toxic pens is a great way to communicate this clearly; young people can see instantly 'what's on the menu' when they arrive. It's always good to give young people an opportunity to come up with ideas themselves (as long as it's safe and suitable!). This can help instil a degree of positive ownership for young people too.



- **Who does what?** Once a plan is in place, for all tasks, no matter what they are, it's very important that young people are allowed to freely choose what they would like to do when they arrive to help. It's a good idea to have young people working in small groups and certainly in pairs. Some tasks are suitable for young people to work independently and, if it's a task they do regularly, they will know what to do anyway, but it's always sensible to give young people clear guidance on what needs doing, especially if they are doing it for the first time. Advice on preparing activities will be explained later on, but some of your weekly/daily tasks that you know will be a new experience for young people should, if possible, have an adult assigned to them. In an ideal world, three tasks would mean three supporting adults for three small groups, but, if adult support is limited, you can plan for a 'cluster of quick tasks' that one adult could lead during a session with one small group of young people. Advice on how to prepare for this and other activities will be explained later.
- **Allotment log book:** Having an onsite log book, especially for large school allotments which are used by young people through the week, is absolutely essential to keeping a track on what gets done, and by whom, each week. It will also greatly help to prevent confusion on what has been planted where (make sure you number growing beds!) and what daily tasks were completed and what didn't get completed. A log book is also an excellent way for adults to recommend jobs for other sessions later on the week. Things always break and need a repair too and a log book is a great way to record 'repair requests'. From experience, a log book greatly aids weekly planning as it's not only a great way to monitor how things are going, but also a great way for all involved to communicate in one central place, as long as the log book is not taken home and stored in a dry place away from the allotment!





Preparation

Once your daily or weekly planning is clear to all, tasks can now be executed, but what's the best way to get things ready? When lunchtime sessions especially are very short, it's even more important to make sure things are prepared as well as possible. Here are some top tips:

- **Tools and equipment at the ready!** Getting the tools and equipment that you need ready before the session starts means that everything will start smoothly and time won't be lost getting tools out for the young people to use. Along with tools, if watering cans, wheelbarrows and weed buckets, as examples, can come out before the session starts, again, this will help make the session(s) go significantly more smoothly and be more impactful for the young people.
- **Showing or demonstrating a task with pre-examples:** We highly recommend, if possible, that young people gain a clear visualisation of what task you have suggested for them. A good example would be planting trees or sowing a line of seeds: show a physical example of what the end result needs to look like; young people will instantly see what they are doing and feel more confident to complete the task because they understand.



Quick and clear demonstrations will bring dividends to working with young people and will greatly aid that all-important good experience; young people will feel great about themselves because they understood.





Clear demonstrations are not just important for young people, but for nature too! Planting hundreds of trees incorrectly and without manure and mulch could mean young trees perish when spring and summer arrives.

- **Volunteer support:** If a project is fortunate enough to have local volunteers, these wonderful people can help get everything prepared and set out before the sessions start. Teachers/teaching assistants are extremely busy people with very little time on their hands. Inviting volunteers to help with preparation would certainly mean that the whole allotment experience is significantly more impactful, especially with many school lunchtimes being unfairly short.



Volunteers are key to successful allotment sessions, especially at lunchtimes. Helping to ready key tools and equipment means that when the young people arrive, everything is ready to go!

Starting Sessions

Once the plan is clear and all preparations have been made, what is the best way to get things started at a school allotment? It's very different to getting a class ready for their lesson, but, at the same time, there needs to be an element of structure and clear communication from the very start. Smaller allotments are easier to manage with bigger ones requiring some more thought, but regardless of size and attainment, here is what we recommend:



- **Have a mustering area:** young people will no doubt be very enthusiastic when they arrive at the allotment and will want to know what will be happening. It's recommended to have a designated mustering area when young people assemble at the very beginning of a session. This is where your adults should be and where the tasks can be communicated ('advertised') to the young people. If you have a display board, this would be the ideal place to have this on show. If a lunchtime session, allow young people to have their lunch and a drink and, during the short window, help install an atmosphere of calm. It's crucial to remember, at all times, that a school allotment is not, nor should it ever be, an extension of the playground.
- **Decision time!** One adult will need to take charge to communicate 'what's on the menu' today. As mentioned previously, it is highly recommended, if possible, some adults are allocated to supervise certain tasks. Adults, and their allocated task or 'cluster of tasks' should be 'advertised' to the young people together. It's very important that young people then freely choose what they would like to do and who they would like to work with on the day. Encourage young people to stay with the task that they have chosen, otherwise things can get complicated and unclear.




Ending sessions

Ending a session in the right way is equally as important as starting a session... we highly recommend the following to end sessions at a school allotment:

- **A gentle and calm end:** Remember a school allotment is **not** the same as an indoor school environment. A school allotment, even as a short and temporary experience, gives young people the chance to escape the hustle and bustle of school which can, at times, be not too far away from being a busy railway station with tannoy announcements followed by a surge of movement. A school allotment must not mimic this in any way which is why we recommend a gentle and calm end to an allotment session. This could be done in two ways:
 - 1) One adult, or a trusted student, gently and quietly inviting students to start packing away and heading back to the mustering station where the session started. This is an obvious choice for small allotments.
 - 2) For larger projects a gentle sound, used to signal that it's time to pack away, is a great way for all to hear it's time to finish. We highly recommend the use of Tibetan hand bells (purchased as a Fair Trade product) which, with their high pitch but peaceful chime, is a far better way than loud voices ordering young people that it's time to go. You can listen [here](#).



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- **Tools away!** When the signal has been given to pack away, it is important to promote to young people that they must help the adults to put away tools and not suddenly abandon them nor leave them scattered around the allotment. One adult, or trusted student, could be assigned to gather tools in one place. Local volunteers could then support further by stowing tools away correctly (in shed or lock up) while the member of staff wraps everything up with the young people.



Putting tools away correctly helps young people to respect them more, especially ones that have been donated and then repaired/restored!



- **Informal debrief:** If time allows, have a quick and calm debrief to celebrate the young people's achievements. Allowing no more than five minutes to do this would work well and it provides an opportunity for the young people to also reflect on their experience. If there is not time, at the very least, making sure an adult thanks young people for coming as they exit a school allotment. It's super important for young people to leave feeling a sense of worth.



If it's possible to have a debrief with the young people, do! It's a great way to celebrate young people and help them feel valued.

Don't forget!

The single most important thing to get right **every** session, no matter what, is that the young people gain a **good and memorable experience**. If the potatoes are planted and grow, well, that's a bonus! This is grass roots gardening and should be fun, engaging and wholesome for your young people.



Credit: Jason Bye