

Planning

Plots come in all shapes and sizes and may be affected by site boundaries or existing structures on nearby plots. Gardeners vary even more, some preferring open plots, others raised beds, some growing fruit, others mainly vegetables.

We're each aiming for different outcomes and working in different situations, so there can be no "right" plot. This guide aims to help you make the most of your space and warn you against common mistakes, not tell you where to plant everything.

BEDS

An advantage of a bed system (with permanent beds, usually boxed in and raised a little above the general soil level) is that an area of maybe 1m by 3m is much less of a daunting task than a whole, empty plot when it comes to digging. Beds also simplify the management of crop rotation, and reduce the likelihood of compaction caused by walking on the soil.

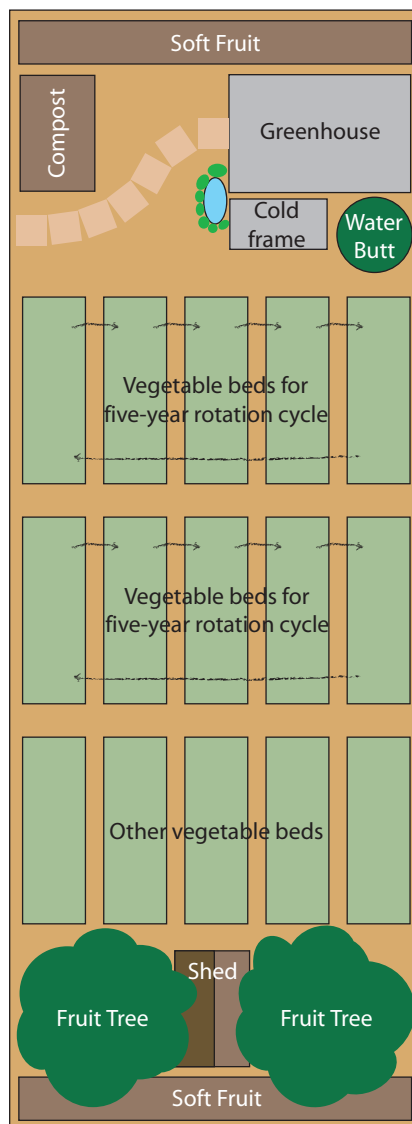
If you decide on a bed system (see the illustration, right), it is worth making the paths between the beds 40cm to 60cm wide: plants will spill over the edge (and roots grow under) so space isn't actually lost. Don't make the beds themselves more than 1.2m wide, or it will be difficult to reach the middle. If you're working to a five-year crop rotation plan you need 5 or 10 beds to support it, and additional beds for the crops that are either permanent or don't require rotation.

NO BEDS

Beds have their advantages, but there are also benefits to a large space which can be used in any way you choose, perhaps starting afresh each year. Potatoes, for example, are more easily grown in open ground. The wooden frame around a small bed will get in the way when you

earth up the rows and lift the tubers, and the width of the bed may mean you can get only a single row in.

If you choose open ground, or a combination of beds and open ground, be sure to have some stout boards available to walk on, so the soil doesn't become compacted. Also have a way of identifying where last year's crops were grown, so you can practice crop rotation.



An example of a 5-pole plot plan, incorporating shed, greenhouse, coldframe, compost area, water butt, pond, rows of soft fruit, fruit trees, 10 beds used for five-year crop rotation and a further 5 beds for permanent planting. Almost everything you want!

COMPOST

You probably need more space than you think. Even on a 5-pole plot you need two bins one metre square, and space to work around them. This allows you to turn the compost for faster decomposition, and means you can be using compost from one bin at the same time as adding fresh material to the other. A sunny position helps decomposition, so don't hide the bins in a shady corner.

TREES

Fruit trees should be kept well away from the plot edge, or they will affect your neighbours and you may be asked to remove them; check to see how large they grow – there are many good dwarfing rootstocks available today. If you're worried about losing space, you could put a shed underneath. A tree can also provide light shade for a greenhouse in summer.

SHEDS AND GREENHOUSES

These should be located away from the edges of the plot, to make sure the general paths are accessible. A 40-50cm gap should do, and will also reduce the likelihood of complaints from neighbours.

Don't put in a concrete base; they're not allowed, and do get permission from the site manager before you start building.

PONDS

These can be a great benefit to wildlife, and even a pond the size of a washing-up bowl is useful so long as it has shade in summer to prevent it drying out.

The pond should be kept away from paths and preferably surrounded by obstacles (a bench, or some plants) so people are less likely to accidentally step in.