

## Fact Sheet

# Health and safety on allotments: advice on activities requiring special management

Contact details for all organisations referred to in this factsheet are listed on the *Resources* sheet

The activities outlined below require additional risk assessments and additional legal regulations may apply. Check with your insurance company whether these activities are covered under the policy(s) held.

## Trading huts

Trading huts (site shops) can help to generate site income but carry obligations related to personal safety, fire prevention and storage, handling and sale of pesticides, fertilisers and fuel.

Associations need to have written permission from the allotment authority to have a trading hut: if you are unsure about permission for an existing trading hut, check with the allotment authority. Both

parties should ensure the legal documentation is up to date and that each is aware of their liabilities. Allotment authorities should keep up to date with the activities of site trading huts they have permitted.



*An untidy trading hut presents hazards to users*

## Fire prevention

The contents of trading hut sundries can become a lethal cocktail in a fire, e.g. a mixture of fuel, pesticides, animal bedding and fertilisers. Trading huts are a popular target for arson attacks.

Make your local fire service aware of the items that are stored in your hut and get site-specific advice from them regarding fire extinguishers, legal requirements and fire prevention. Draw up an emergency action plan. A list of emergency contact numbers should be clearly displayed on-site so that it is visible to any emergency services called to the site.



*Trading huts are a popular target for arson attacks*

## Fuel storage

Regulations will depend on where you are located in the UK. Contact the Environment Agency for further information. Spillages should be cleaned up immediately. Wear disposable gloves and use sand, cat litter or a proprietary oil absorbent. Contact your local council for disposal details. Spilt oil should never be hosed down or poured into water courses or drains.



## Paid employees and volunteers

The common duty of care of anyone involved in allotment management to ensure that their allotment sites are run in as safe and appropriate manner as possible is extended to paid employees and volunteers working in a trading hut. The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (2002) (COSHH) also apply. Contact the Health and Safety Executive for advice. For further advice please see the section on insurance on pages 7-8 of the *All about risk assessments* factsheet in this pack.

## Pesticides and fertilisers

Pesticides are chemicals deliberately made to be toxic and introduced into the environment. They include weedkillers, rat poisons, fungicides and soil sterilants. Both trading huts and plotholders have a duty of care to store, use and dispose of them properly.

Under the Control of Pesticides Regulations (amended) (COPRA) (1997) anyone who sells, supplies, stores or uses a pesticide must take all reasonable precautions to protect the health of humans, creatures and plants, safeguard the environment and avoid the pollution of water. Allotments are specifically mentioned.

Pesticides must be sold, supplied and marketed to end-users in the container supplied by the approved license holder

and labeled in a manner consistent with the approved license. Pesticides that are bought in bulk by a trading hut or group of plotholders should never be decanted into any other type of container.

Pesticides should not be brought into the UK from other countries. Plotholders have been prosecuted for the importing and storage of pesticides illegal in the UK.

Whether in a shed or trading hut, pesticides should be stored well out of the reach of children and locked away. Sacks of slug pellets are often displayed at ground level in trading huts, where the pellets could easily be eaten by a small child.

The Fertilisers Regulations (1991) (as amended) regulate the composition, labelling and packaging of fertilisers. Do not store fertilisers within 10 metres of a watercourse or field drain to avoid nitrate leaching: follow the codes of practice provided by the Agricultural Industries Federation.

Contact the Chemicals Regulation Directorate for further information about regulations governing pesticides.

## Disposal of pesticides and fertilisers

Associations and plotholders should contact their council waste management department for information on safe disposal of pesticides and fertilisers. Pesticides should never be included in household rubbish, burnt, placed in skips or poured into any kind of drainage system or watercourse.

Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK) is keen to work with allotment holders and associations to reduce pesticide use. Their website gives gardening tips with updates on legislative changes, research and initiatives to reduce pesticide use. The website also has a database of local council facilities for the disposal of old bottles in sheds and discontinued pesticides.

Garden Organic provide advice and publications on methods of pest control that do not require pesticides and gardening methods that reduce pest attack.



*Never decant pesticides into other containers*



## Tool bank

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Sharing tools is a good way of cutting costs. Organisers of a tool bank have a duty of care to people loaning, borrowing and using tools.

Associations running a tool bank must ensure plotholders using the tool bank are given training before they are permitted to borrow association-owned tools. Most power tools need specific safety and handling training, e.g. power chainsaws, wood chippers, strimmers with metal blades and tractors. Local colleges may offer short and accredited training courses, or ask the supplier for advice. Do not purchase tools before you have addressed training needs. The person authorised to loan tools to plotholders also needs to have sufficient training.

Schedule a regular inspection of all hand and power tools and withdraw any that are blunt (blunt tools are dangerous), have loose handles or are faulty, until they have been repaired.

Tools should be stored in a locked, secure container: ARI recommends shipping containers (see ARI factsheet *Safe Sites*). Only authorised persons should be key-holders of tool stores and a full inventory/record-keeping system should be in place. Some equipment may have additional storage regulations, e.g. fuel-powered tools may need to be caged



inside a separate secure container that does not contain any other flammable materials. BTCV produce a useful book called 'Toolcare'.

## Ponds and water

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### Why have ponds on allotments?

Ramshackle water tubs and overgrown 'ad hoc' ponds on plots give ponds a bad name: ponds that are planned and maintained properly pose a tiny risk, far outweighed by the numerous benefits to wildlife and enjoyment to people of all ages. Contact your local Wildlife Trust, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation and Pond Conservation about construction and maintenance of wildlife ponds.

### Risks from ponds to children

The people most at risk of drowning in ponds are children under three years of age. Risk from drowning decreases as a child's age and understanding of danger increase. Children should of course be supervised on allotments at all times and especially near water.

### Pond decisions

Decisions about ponds lie with the organisation managing the site, although the landowner could have the final say. Decisions about ponds should be made on a site-by-site basis, taking into account the



site's physical layout, level of open access and users. Building a pond on a site with a public right of way raises different issues to one with secure fencing.

Plotholders with children may prefer any communal ponds to be sited in an area of the site away from their plots.

### **Size and shape**

A child is less likely to drown in a pond or water feature that has gradual sloping sides compared to a small one with steep sides. Sloping sides also prevent drowning of mammals that come to drink water.

Aim to make ponds shallow and seasonal; 30-50cm at the deepest point is sufficient for biodiversity. Ponds should be allowed to dry out in the shallow margins in summer. Margins will be more visible to children and biodiversity is greatest in warm shallows. In winter use a float to prevent icing-over, otherwise children may be tempted to walk on ice and pond-life will be starved of oxygen.

Large ponds should ideally allow for a shallow margin of at least 3m with a gentle and gradual gradient of no greater than 1:3. If the water level is likely to rise after rain or flooding then the shallow margin may need to be made greater than 3m wide. Depending on the constraints of

the site and the affects upon biodiversity, consider re-grading existing large ponds to these specifications.

### **Planting**

Naturally occurring ponds usually have a soft muddy edge with reeds, scrub or other vegetation established on the bank and in shallow water at the edge. This can reduce the possibility of children (and dogs) accidentally running into the pond, so it is good practice to encourage this in the shallow area.

Some kinds of blanketing vegetation can look like solid ground. For safety and conservation remove carpets of duckweed and water fern (Azolla). Manage grasses, e.g. Flote Grass (Glyceria) and leave a frill around the edge but not masking the water. Allow a belt of tall reedy vegetation to grow up around the pond.

### **Alternative water features**

Plotholders often have limited space and small containers, such as a washing up bowls, are popular on individual plots to attract wildlife and improve aesthetics. Where smaller ponds or containers are to be used, sloping sides should be incorporated into the design and vegetation should not be allowed to grow over and conceal the pond.



*Children are fascinated by pond life*



## Security

Low fencing should not be necessary around a pond or water feature unless there is a drop from a well-used edge into deep water (more than 1.5m). Low fencing around a pond draws attention to the hazard but might not necessarily prevent access to the pond - it is only a partial solution and can lead to a false sense of security. Fencing can provide an additional 'temptation' to natural childhood inquisitiveness and a low fence can easily be climbed over or through. In a recent case, a fence's palings were wide enough for the child to squeeze through but did prevent the distressed parent from gaining access (the child was fortunately not hurt). If fences must be installed they must be very regularly checked and maintained.

Warning signs are rarely needed for most ponds - the people most at risk have not yet learnt to read and should be supervised around water. However, if the water is deep at the edge of the pond (e.g. more than 1.5m) it can cause risk to people of all ages - erect a "Danger - Deep water" sign. Ponds too deep for an adult to perform a wading rescue need a reach pole or throw line or consider filling the pond to a safer depth. Signs on the approach to a pond can warn people with children to supervise them more closely.

A grid above the surface of a pond can also engender a false sense of security and requires regular checking. After rainfall the water level could rise high enough above the grid to present a drowning hazard for young children. If the grid is damaged a child may get trapped in it or crawl underneath.

## Water storage

Many plottolders use water butts to collect rainwater and some allotment sites use water tanks or old baths next to communal taps to catch or store water.

Storage units should not be sunk in the ground as people could fall in and it is bad for your back to stoop that far to fill watering cans. Position storage units high enough to be out of reach of young children but bear in mind that a curious



child could use a prop to climb up, fall in the water and be unable to get out.

Keep containers free of debris and covered where possible: do not use rotten doors, sheeting or any other flimsy materials that children could fall through. Discard stagnant water as it poses a health risk and is not beneficial to plants.

## Livestock

Animals should not be kept on allotments unless they can be provided with an appropriate environment and adequate care.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) recommends that councils draw up 'Animals & Allotments' policies in consultation with associations. Policies should include plans for emergencies, e.g. fire, flood or the need for emergency slaughter. Plottolders keeping livestock must be responsible and knowledgeable.

The tenancy agreement should state that owners require suitable insurance in case their animal strays and causes damage or injury. Owners are legally required to have formal identification for some animals, such as an 'equine passport': contact your local veterinary surgery. Regulations or restrictions issued by DEFRA must be adhered to.

Any allotment holder keeping animals should provide full contact details with 24-hour contact numbers in case of emergencies.

A designated person from the allotment authority or association with suitable livestock welfare knowledge should carry out prearranged and spot checks on the animals kept on site.

For further advice on good practice read the RSPCA's 'Animals on allotments' factsheet. Suspected animal cruelty should always be reported to the RSPCA.

Contact your local city farm (if you have one) for advice on training in livestock care; they may know where to access it or may wish to organise a joint training course. Local agricultural colleges may also provide training.



*Cockerels have ruffled many feathers on allotments, as only hens are allowed*

## Wildlife

Allotments can be a crucial haven for wildlife and many species are beneficial to gardeners: thrushes and amphibians eat slugs (but can be killed by slug pellets); certain flowers attract insects that prey on pests. Garden Organic and PAN provide advice on gardening methods beneficial to wildlife.

'Manicured' (over-tidy) plots are not beneficial to wildlife. Wildlife areas do not have to be overgrown or unkempt. RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts provide free booklets on creating wildlife gardens: RSPB's website has a detailed guide to encouraging wildlife in gardens.



Hazards for wildlife on allotments include: litter, low-level fruit netting, use of pesticides (especially when incorrect or inappropriate), open drains, slug pellets, mowing, strimming, broken glass and pre-stacked bonfires. Allotment managers should ensure day-to-day activities on site cause the least possible risk to wild species of birds, animals and aquatic creatures.

Certain wildlife, e.g. badgers, some birds of prey and reptiles, have specific legal protection concerning their management - contact Natural England for advice about protected species.

Rabbit snares are illegal unless the permission of the landowner is obtained. Permitted snares must conform to sizes and shapes that will not endanger other animals – DEFRA can provide specifications.

RSPCA produce a free 'Lethal Litter' information card.

See also Natural England's leaflet 'Wildlife on Allotments' available to download from their website: [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk).

## Vermin

Vermin infestation is a serious threat to public health; rats carry 70 diseases, including Weil's Disease (leptospirosis), which can cause human death via contaminated water. Practices that encourage infestation by vermin should be avoided and incidents dealt with

immediately. Advise plotholders to be vigilant and report any signs of infestation, which include burrows, tracks, droppings and observing the vermin. Only proprietary vermin control products should be used. Pesticides should never be used to control vermin. Contact the local council's Pest Control Officer for advice and to report problems.

## Risk of infection

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Humans are at risk of infection from handling animal manure. Always wear gloves when handling any type of manure. Fresh manure should be heaped for 6 months, giving time for e-coli bacteria to break down.

Remind plotholders of basic hygiene and to check tetanus boosters are up to date (boosters are required every ten years).

## Contaminated land

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The true extent of land contamination is unknown. If you have concerns about land contamination read 'Growing food – how safe is your land?', available from ARI.

## Personal safety

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Allotment gardeners often spend long periods of time on their own on site: encourage them to take personal safety seriously whilst on the site and to tell another person where they are going and what time they will be back. When a tenancy agreement is signed, next of kin contact details should be obtained in case a plotholder becomes ill whilst on site. Contact your local police for information about crime prevention and personal safety. See ARI factsheet *Safe Sites* for advice about intruders.

## Bonfires

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There is no law preventing bonfires. 'Smokeless zones' refer to domestic chimneys only. The Environmental Protection Act (1990), however, prohibits a statutory nuisance being caused by smoke. Local byelaws and voluntary agreements may also be in force.

Risk and nuisance from bonfires can be reduced by simple policies, such as only allowing bonfires at certain times. Many local authorities and associations produce bonfire guidance leaflets for their plotholders (contact ARI for samples). Adding basic 'nuisance' clauses to tenancy agreements makes bonfire complaints easier to deal with.

Most insurance policies for allotments now have very specific rules about the location, materials burnt and extinguishing of bonfires. Check with your insurer on rules and inform plotholders.

## Events

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Open days, BBQs and plant sales can raise funds, build local support and attract new plotholders. Event organisers have a duty of care to everyone attending and working at events. Hold a specific risk assessment in advance of the event, considering these issues:

- Access to the rest of the site and other hazards should be restricted and continually monitored during the event.
- Seek advice about fire prevention, especially where generators, BBQs, cooking/heating hobs are being used. Arrange appropriate fire extinguishers. A fire emergency procedures notice should be clearly displayed at the entrance to the event.





Our vision is to  
increase allotment  
uptake by individuals  
and groups

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- Have a volunteer (qualified) First Aider available or St John's Ambulance for a large event.
- Ensure hygiene provisions are adequate for the type of event, especially toilets/hand washing/drinking water/sale of food. Consult the council environmental health department.
- Check with your insurer that the type of event, activities (including sales), guests and staff are covered on your current public liability insurance policy. Take out additional insurance cover if necessary. Make sure all documents are up to date.
- Notify the local authority of the date, time and type of event well in advance and before it is advertised.
- Notify the police and traffic wardens of the date, time and type of event; access may become busier and there may be increased parking around the site.