

What is regenerative growing?

This was the widely asked question that John Ingham set out to answer on Saturday 13 September 2025 on Lower Common East Allotments. Thankyou to Anu Anand (plot 134) who kindly hosted us.

John started by quoting from a Sanscrit script over 2000 years old, which is relevant today as then:

Upon this handful of soil our survival depends. Husband it and it will grow our food, our fuel, and our shelter and surround us with beauty. Abuse it and the soil will collapse and die, taking humanity with it.

He then described the complex relationship between plants and fungi in the soil bio domes ie how the microbes and fungi around the plant roots interact with the plants. The relevance of this to ordinary growers like us is being more understood. It affects the nutritional value of food and has an effect on the amount of carbon held (sequestered); in the soil.

The basic aims of regenerative growing are to improve soil health and carbon sequestration by using the following techniques. He emphasised that it was different (although similar) to pure organic gardening. At the moment there is no regulatory definition of regenerative growing, although it is being adopted widely around the world by farmers.

The basic principles are:

1. Minimum soil disturbance
2. Keep all surfaces covered with either mulches or plants. These stops leaching of beneficial elements from the soil and also stops overheating of the soil. The plants could be legumes (peas, beans etc), perennials (such as perennial cabbages, sorrels), catch crops (ie radishes, green manures).
3. Grow a wide variety of crops. Allow flowering and self seeding, as this supports biodiversity. He also advised that inter planting crops works well to maintain soil health as well as helping to control pests (known as companion planting).

By using these techniques, the air and water holding capacity of the soil will improve, which means less watering and more nutritious, stronger crops.

The vexed question of weeds was raised almost immediately, especially how to deal with the perennial types. If a plot is badly overgrown some initial digging will be needed. Start slow and cover some while concentrating on a section. If a plot is infested with bindweed or mares-tail, it can take time to reduce its impact, and they will never go away. You can still grow reasonably well by being persistent and regularly pulling them up, which in the long run will weaken them. Try and pull them out before they flower. There were various suggestions about disposing of pulled weeds. They can be effectively killed by rotting them down in black sacks for a year or so, after which they can then be used as a mulch.

Someone asked how long will it take to become regenerative?

Johns' advice was to start slow. Progress will be uneven, but it shouldn't take very long.

Slugs and snails – again this is a vexed question. It takes persistence and toleration. Pick off snails, kill slugs (n.b. not all slugs are bad – see Royal Horticultural Society website for more information <https://www.rhs.org.uk/biodiversity/slugs-and-snails>). There's lots advice, clever tricks on-line, but the more balanced the eco-system of the ground is, the better chance you have of reducing problems. Inter planting helps reduce invasions. Anu pointed out her system of bins – she has a « green » bin (weeds to go to the Council collection), a compost bin and a tea-bin (liquid feed made from plants, for example comfrey).

She will be setting up a communal plant-tea demonstration in the hut at Lower Common East soon. Watch out for news of that.

Notes taken by Jacky Wilkinson.

To join the Regeneration WhatsApp group, send me your name, number and site on planning@banes-allotments.org.uk