

Lazy gardener aspirations...

Experimenting with plant guilds and regenerative growing 34a Bloomfield Green allotments

When I took on my first allotment in 2015, I had no idea what I was doing. My half plot site was overgrown and intimidating. I started by planting living supermarket lettuces, sprouting cupboard potatoes, and any spare seedlings people offered.

Many things failed spectacularly. Slugs devoured every lettuce and many of the beans. Long awaited sprouting broccoli was stripped by birds. Badgers ate my sweetcorn. Bind weed and mares' tails ruled supreme.

But I also had successes. Potatoes were good, barely touched by pests and drought. Existing fruit bushes and new chard proved resilient. Slowly, I started to find a rhythm.

My interest in regenerative and organic growing started, if I'm honest, through laziness. Less digging, watering, weeding and pest control has been, from the start, my ambition. And the more I tried these approaches, the more they worked.

I love seeing my soil get healthier, more biodiversity appearing, and better ground cover helping reduce losses and reduce watering need.

Then I discovered a whole new world of **polycultures and plant guilds...**

This page shares what I'm learning as I experiment with regenerative growing and plant guilds on my allotment. I'm no expert, but I'm happy to get stuck in and try.

I'll cover - at a very high level - an introduction to:

1. **Regenerative growing**, and why it's the best thing you can do for your site;
2. **Plant guilds**, why you should consider this over growing single crop beds; and
3. **Zoning**, a way to design your allotment to minimise effort.

1. Regenerative growing

Regenerative growing is simply gardening in a way that works with nature. It's the wider concept under which polyculture and plant guilds fit, and a route to healthier soil, stronger plants, greater productivity, and better resilience (primarily resilience to my own neglect).

These are four of the key principles:



The ideas are widely explored in permaculture literature such as Gaia's Garden and by our UK king of No Dig, Charles Dowding. You don't need to do everything at once. Even one small change can make a difference.

- Learn more about: **Regenerative growing** (section 3)
- Find out about plant roles: **Plants by function** (section 4)
- See guild planting designs: **Guild examples** (section 5)

My focus here is on planting, and what I mean by Guild it, Root it, Zone it.

2. Planting: Guild it

Traditional allotments often grow one crop per bed. Regenerative growing encourages you to mix plants together and create a **polyculture**.

You may have heard of companion planting and intercropping. Both are simple forms of polycultures. A **plant guild** is similar, but just take this to the next level.

- **Companion planting:** combining plants to their mutual benefit
- **Interplanting:** mixing crops to share space and nutrients
- **Plant guild:** a mini-ecosystem combining both interplanting and companion planting.

A plant guild aims to create a **natural plant cooperative**, where the combination of plants creates better conditions than any one could alone.

For example:

- Plants with deep roots pull nutrients upwards
- Ground cover plants protect soil
- Flowers attract pollinators
- Scents confuse pests

There are well established plant guilds, or you can design your own.

The advice for designing your own is start with one main crop - your “star player”. Then select plants that will help it thrive, whilst providing more crops, and improving soil, biodiversity, and water resilience.

Which plants to add to your support team? Think about plants in terms of the role they can play. Most plants provide more than one role, and you don’t need every role in every guild. These are some of the roles to consider:



It's worth bearing in mind that some plants just don't get on together, so do your research to sense check your selections once you've selected your plant community. There's plenty of information on the internet to help.

I've rearranged my allotment this year ready to experiment with the plant guild concept. These are the guilds I am trying right now:

- **Fruit tree guild** - to make best use of the space below an apple tree
- **Three Sisters** (with a fourth sister of flowers)
- **Tomato guild** for moisture and pest balance
- **Potato guild** in the low-maintenance zone
- **An intensive seasonal brassica guild** inspired by Nepalese growing systems

Details of the planting in each guild is [outlined in section 5 below](#).

2.2 Planting: Root it

This is all about planning your site to keep roots growing in the soil as much of the year as possible. Why is that important? Living roots feed soil life and hold nutrients in place for future crops.

There are many ways to keep roots in your soil for longer - including:

- **Succession planting:** also great to extend your cropping period
- **Seasonal planting:** growing crops all year
- **Perennials:** keeping roots in the ground all year round
- **Living mulches:** low growing plants that protect soil and provide a wildlife habitats
- **Leaving roots:** even spent plant roots add value. Chop off stems and leave roots in the ground when you harvest (unless it's diseased or invasive).

2.3 Planting: Zone it

Another route to easy gardening is to think about your planting space in terms of "zones".

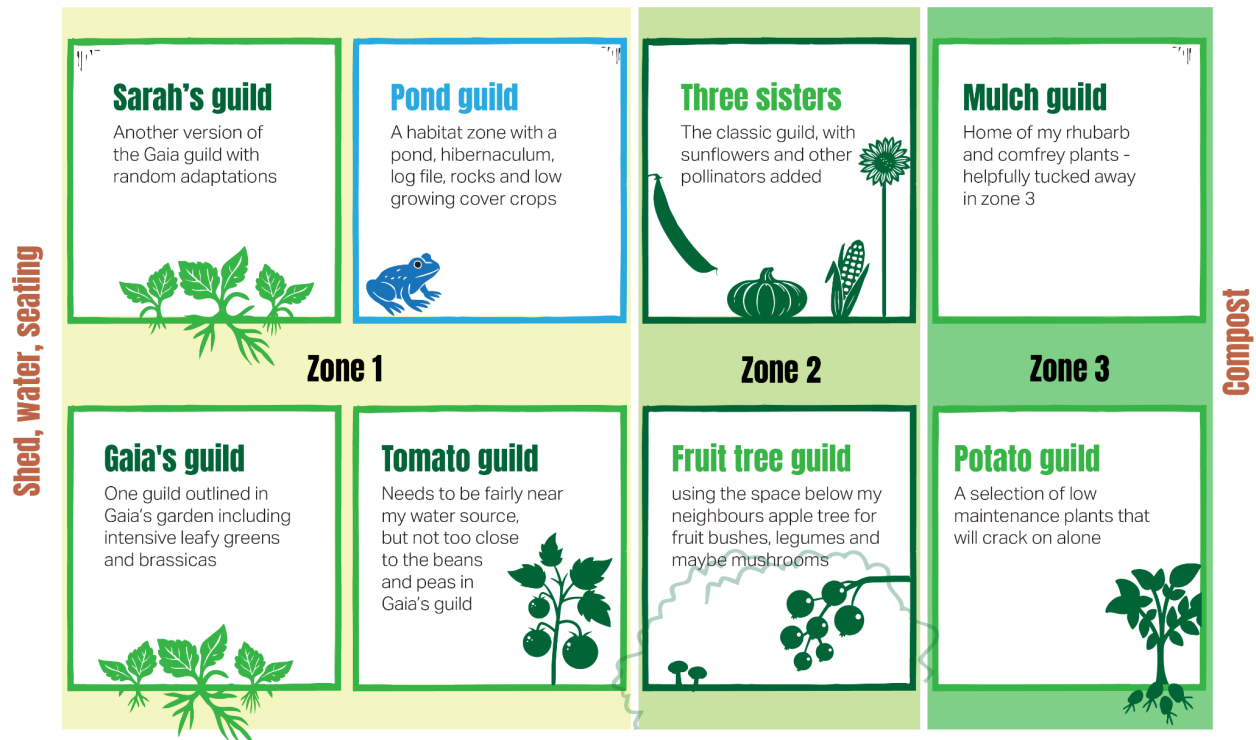
Zoning your space is purely about admitting how often you get there.

Zone 1: is close to water and seating. Good for delicate crops that need attention.

Zone 2: is visited regularly, but not every time. Great for beans, squash and fruit bushes.

Zone 3: gets lowest attention. Needs hardy plants like potatoes, rhubarb and comfrey.

This is how I've set up my allotment:



Zone 1 is the area closest to my shed, water butts, seating area and cold frame.

This is also closest to where I enter the allotment, so if I'm running over to do emergency tasks, I may not get beyond here. I'm using this area for my intensive vegetable guilds, and my tomato guild. As there was an established rosemary bush here, not easily moved, I turned that area into a "pond guild". I hope the planting here will support pond life and wider biodiversity.

Zone 2 is also fairly accessible, but I pay less attention to this area.

Whilst I get here less often, I can keep a eye on it as I race around the top area. But things here will generally get less regular attention. Squash plants and beans are fairly needy, but I find are more robust than leafy greens. I've put my three sisters' guild here. And as my neighbours apple tree is here, this is where my apple tree guild is - helpful as fruit bushes are fairly tough.

Zone 3 is very much "out of sight, out of mind".

Of course I regularly head down here as it's where my compost area is (plus a new water collection system). But when time is short, I'll run to the compost and ignore what's around me so I need to be realistic! I find potatoes can be wantonly neglected, so they're here. I also had established comfrey and rhubarb plants here so they've remained as they're heavily Teflon.

3. Regenerative growing in practice

Here are a few more details on those four key principles:



Healthy soil is the first step to growing healthy plants and creating a resilient, productive space that can thrive with less effort from you

- **Feed it.** Like us, soil needs nutrients to stay healthy and productive. Anything organic will work - leaf mulch, leaves, compost and woodchip will help build richer, living soil.
- **Dig less.** Too much digging breaks up the underground fungal networks that plants rely on for health. Check out Charles Dowding and many others for information on the power of cardboard and compost.
- **Cover it.** Bare soil dries out in the sun, washes away in rain, gives weeds space to grow, and is more susceptible to temperature swings. Cover it with mulch, plants or even cardboard - all will both protect and nourish it



Water: Rain is one of the most valuable resources on an allotment. Caring for water helps your plot cope with both heavy rain and dry spells.

- **Store it:** Collect rain in water butts, barrels or buckets. Mulch such as woodchip also absorbs water for slow release; and covered, healthy soil holds moisture for dry days.
- **Slow it:** Fast runoff can wash away valuable soil. Plants, roots, and healthy soil structures slow it, giving time to soak in. If you have a sloped plot, look up swales as a way to capture and hold rainfall for slow release.
- **Sink it:** Good soil acts like a sponge. Living roots, compost, and less digging all help water move down into the ground, where it can support plants and soil life for longer.



Wildlife: Natural systems include a balance of plants and animals. Replicating this balance and working with nature, not against it, is a route to a thriving allotment.

- **Attract it:** A healthy ecosystem brings pollinators and helpful predators that will keep pest numbers in balance, so plant carefully to attract the wildlife you want.
- **Build habitats:** Ponds, log piles, dense planting and dead hedges will all provide homes for the good beasties, creating a natural army to help protect your crops.
- **Be(e) friendly:** We can't grow most fruit and vegetables without pollination, so make your space welcoming to bees and other insects by mixing flowers amongst your crops.



Planting: Planning is one of the simplest ways to get the most from your allotment.

- **Guild it:** Large areas of a single crop can attract pests and diseases. Growing different plants together (a polyculture guild) confuses pests, supports healthier plants and creates a more resilient allotment.
- **Root it:** Roots feed soil life with sugars and carbon, and help hold nutrients in place for future crops. Strive to keep something growing through every season. Succession planting, winter salads and green manures extend the growing window, and most roots can be left in the ground when you harvest.
- **Zone it:** Think about where you naturally spend most time, and where is closest to your water supply. Plants that need the most love should go here. Put plants that need less attention further away.

The secret to allotment success is “slow and steady”. It's better to tackle one bed at a time rather than to try to do everything at once. Likewise, it's good to experiment with one regenerative change at a time - don't try to be perfect immediately.

Winter is an ideal time for planning, but you can also plan as you go. As your regenerative habits build, your allotment will naturally become more resilient to drought, flood, wind and pests, and so far less stressful when life pulls you away.

4. Plants by guild role

A quick introduction to the varying roles plants can play in a cooperative plant guild.

Dynamic nutrient accumulators

Deep-rooted plants that draw minerals from the soil and enrich topsoil when their leaves fall.

E.g. Carrots, comfrey, apple trees, dandelion, camomile, garlic, sunflowers

Fortress plants

Dense or spreading plants that block invasive weeds.

E.g. Maximillian sunflowers, comfrey, Jerusalem artichokes, lemongrass, red-hot poker.

Ground cover crops

Low growers that protect soil from weather and temperature swings.

E.g. red and white clover, mustard, wild strawberry

Mulch makers

Plants that produce leaf litter for use as mulch.

E.g. rhubarb, comfrey, nasturtiums, Jerusalem artichokes

Nitrogen fixers

Plants that enrich the soil by capturing nitrogen from the air.

E.g. Clover, beans peas, alfalfa

Pest repellents

Strong smelling or defensive plants that deter pests.

E.g. nasturtium, elderberry, French marigolds

Pollinator attracters

Flowers that bring essential pollinating insects.

E.g. yarrow, clovers, celery/carrot family including dill and coriander, onion family, sunflower family, mint family

Predator attractors

Plants that invite insects that feed on pests.

E.g. Buckwheat, sweet alyssum, coriander, parsley, dill, fennel, calendula, cosmos, Phacelia

Shelter beltors

Tall or fast growing plants that provide windbreaks, shade or protection.

E.g. Sunflowers, Jerusalem artichokes, achocha, vining/climbing plants

Wildlife supporters

Habitat forming plants that strengthen your ecosystem.

E.g. blueberry, clover, crimson thyme, dill, fennel, hairy vetch, sweet alyssum, lemon balm

5. Guild examples from my allotment

Creating guilds obviously comes with a range of considerations. Not all plants work together: some plants use allelopathy to stunt their neighbours; some planting combinations encourage disease. Guilds also consider where plants fit into the various growing “layers” of a space - from roots, to herbaceous to canopy. You’re planning your space with a 3D mindset, whilst pretty much throwing suggested seed packet spacing out the window.

This is what I am trying this year. Have a go or try another one that works for your growing preferences.



Fruit tree guild

The apple tree guild is another classic. I’m trying this as my allotment neighbour’s apple tree hangs over my plot and its an areas I’ve struggled to use productively. There are many plants that can work in a fruit tree guild. I’ve put some examples here, but do your research to find out more.

Star player: Apple tree or any other fruit tree

Nitrogen fixers: Broad beans, fava beans or clover (which is also good ground cover)

Dynamic accumulators: Comfrey or rhubarb, also both good mulch makers. And borage is also good as a pollinator.

Pest deterrents: Plant garlic chives - ideally around the tree trunk, and French marigolds.

Pollinator attractors: Borage (again), dill, calendula or even foxgloves.

Habitats: Fruit bushes under fruit trees make good use of the vertical space between ground and canopy, and provide good habitats for wildlife..

Ground cover: Alpine strawberries, thyme or clover.

I have mad plans to try adding **wine cap mushrooms** to this guild. They apparently grow easily on an allotment, love being under fruit bushes, and need wood chip for germination.



Three sisters guild

The most commonly known guild, so a useful place to start. Some say it doesn't work in the UK, but I see others find it a hugely productive way to grow (see Nettles and Petals and Chloe) so I'm giving it a go. And I'm adding a fourth sister ...

All can be harvested around the same time in the autumn.

Sweetcorn:

- These provide structure for climbing plants and a windbreak for the squash.
- Sow these first in seed trays. Plant out at 8-10' tall (after last chance of frost)
- There's debate whether sweetcorn stalks are strong enough to hold the beans.
- Consider tall varieties and bear in mind you may need extra stakes.

Trailing squash:

- The large leaves of squash plants provide a living mulch and ground cover to keep soil cool and deter weeds.
- Sow at the same time as the sweetcorn to get them going early.
- Sow narrow side down indoors or in a greenhouse to get started.
- Be aware if these get too vigorous they could also climb the corn!
- Additional ground cover like clove could add to the ground coverage.

Climbing beans:

- Nitrogen fixers and soil nourishers, these will use the corn as structure.
- Either sow in pots or direct into the soil around the sweetcorn.
- Beans can easily outgrow the corn so choose brands carefully.
- As the weight of the beans can snap the corn, don't overload each stem.
- Try using dwarf beans as well / instead of climbers

Flowers:

- Flowers attract more pollinators.
- Think borage and cornflowers.
- Consider sunflowers for additional structures, but be aware of allelopathy.



Tomato guild

I find it easy to have too many tomatoes on a plot so this year I'm determined to rein it in. Putting a guild of other plants around tomatoes will hopefully make good use of space, and critically help me retain more moisture in the soil and reduce blossom end rot from under watering.

Star player: Tomatoes

Pest deterrent: Basil, French marigolds. Does basil make tomatoes taste better? Can't hurt!

Insect attractors: Oregano, verbenas and dog daisies (any flowers).

Ground cover: Creeping thyme



Potato guild

Potatoes are a great plant to help break up compacted soil so are a good thing to plant in areas of low cultivation or clay. I find they're pretty infallible, but as they're a regular feature on my plot it was interesting to explore how to build a guild around them.

Star: I'm growing 1st early (Penton Javelin), 2nd early (Charlotte) and main crop (Desiree).

Pest repellent: leeks (Babingtons perennial), garlic chives, onions. Onions help increase microbial activity.

Nitrogen fixer: I'll grow peas up the sides of the towers to and adds flowers for pollination.

Dynamic accumulator: Horseradish, which also works as a soil conditioner and a pest repellent (but can be virulent so keep it under control).

This year I'm also trying "potato towers". I always dig spuds up too late and end up digging far more than necessary to find them. The tower is a no dig method using straw and compost in chicken wire towers that should remove my need to play the hunt the potato game. This may bring me watering issues so possibly a short lived experiment, but I'll let you know how it goes.

Jajarkot's guild

I read the amazing book *Gaias Garden* on holiday in 2025 which inspired all my allotment trials this year. The book outlines this advanced guild in detail so I figured I had to try it. This is what I'm calling my intensive guild and contains a combination of legumes, early and late brassicas, herbs and salad crops. Initially designed to provide long harvests in Nepal, this guild has the potential to provide food for over 8 months.

Star player: brassicas - cabbage, broccoli or cauliflower.

Ground cover: mustard greens, aragula, garden purslane, radishes, chard, lettuce

Dynamic accumulators: carrots

Insect attractors: herbs such as fennel, dill and coriander

Nitrogen fixers: broad beans, fava beans, bush peas, peas

Pest deterrents: onions, garlic chives, garlic, leeks

I've also gone rogue and added:

- Achocha. This prolific vining plant from the cucurbit family is a **shelter belter**. I plan to grow it along the back of the bed on a fence made of fallen branches. It's fun to grow and I was determined to fit in somewhere. It adds a vertical dimension to the growing space and I'll mix them up with the peas to create an edible wall.
- Calendula and Opium poppy have always been on my plot so are inevitable additions. Both good **insect attractors**, they can only increase pollination.

This guild is about mass sowing. Definitely "throw the seed spacing rules out the box". The guide is to set up the guild as follows:

You'll start around one month before last frost:

- Start brassica seedlings like cabbage, cauliflower, chard, broccoli - indoors to protect from frosts. Ideally, use a mix to extend production over a longer period.
- Then wait until the last frost.

After the last frost: the big sow begins

- Sow a dense layer of ground cover like mustard greens, arugula and garden purslane.
- Add a lighter sowing of salad crops between other sowings - radishes, lettuce, carrots
- Add a dense sowing of herb seeds - fennel, dill, coriander.
- Then legume seeds - broad beans, fava beans, bush peas about 1 foot apart.
- Finally add some alliums - like onions, garlic chives, garlic or leeks

Weeks 2-4: harvest begins

All those sowings will create a hugely dense planting, so start harvest early and keep steadily harvesting across the whole season.

- Thin out and eat as you go to make room for other crops to grow to maturity.
- Thin out by pulling up whole plants to make space for others.
- And at this stage, focus on edible ground cover and herbs.
- Leave beans and alliums to get more established for later harvests.
- Add in brassica seedlings 45cm apart - using gaps created by your first mini harvests.
- I'll start sowing my Achocha seeds indoors around now.

Late spring to early summer:

- Add in basil and bush beans in openings from ongoing mini harvests.
- Last spring I'll be adding my Achocha to the living wall of peas.
- A few of the plants will be bolting by now, so harvest them before they go to seed.

Keep harvesting all the time to keep things spaced correctly and avoid everything being too squashed.

And think about how to keep this going through the winter months. Plan for winter cabbages, mustard greens and clover, and broad beans and peas can also over winter.

Keep it slow and steady

I learned early on from a friendly fellow allotmenter that slow and steady wins the race. Do one thing at a time. One bed at a time. One plant at a time.

Regenerative growing isn't about perfection.

It's about building a plot that can support itself - even when life gets busy.

Try one change.

Observe what happens.

Learn and adapt to improve year by year.

Happy growing

References

- [Gaia's Garden](#): A Guide to Home-Scale Permaculture, 2nd Edition Book by Toby Hemenway. This was the highest rated book on permaculture gardening I could find, and I found it truly inspirational. I read it front to back on holiday in Spain.
- [Charles Dowding](#). The king of no dig, Charles is probably the most well known advocate of the no dig method. He has many books in print and much content online. I was lucky enough to be gifted a day's training at his home in Somerset. Really interesting and highly recommended
- This [Great article on plant guilds](#) is something I fell across and found useful.
- [Nettles and Petals](#) - Jamie is an ecological horticulturalist and conservationist I found on Facebook. He is a head grower and land steward in North Yorkshire who shares his experiences of growing regeneratively in polycultures. He also has a best selling book out that I must read one day!
- [Wildly Chlo](#) is a quirky independent grower and content creator I also found on facebook. She also advocates for regenerative growing including polyculture planting and no dig. She has produced a comprehensive planner book that looks good.
- John from Larkhall allotments has created a fabulous website about regenerative growing with far more detail than me.