

Alternatives to using plastic sheeting on the allotment

You may have noticed that black plastic is no longer available to buy from the allotment shop. Before you try and buy it elsewhere, ask yourself do I really need it, and are there any alternatives to covering my plot in plastic? It's no secret that we should all be trying to reduce our plastic usage, and to me it seems counterintuitive to be creating more plastic waste through our allotments. Here are some of the main uses for plastic sheeting on the allotment, and some alternatives for you to consider.

Covering the ground during the winter

A lot of us like to cover our empty beds with plastic during the winter to stop weeds from growing, with the added bonus that it helps the soil warm up a bit faster in the spring. Winter doesn't mean that all activity has to stop on the plot. Here are a few alternatives:

1. Overwintering vegetables. Once the summer crops have finished, fill the empty beds with vegetables that will grow over the winter. This keeps your beds full and producing, with the added bonus that you get harvests throughout the winter and into early spring. Try planting onions, garlic, brussels sprouts, even potatoes ready to harvest for Christmas. Beetroot, pak choi, turnips, carrots and winter greens. I'd much rather see my plot full of life and producing crops over the winter than covered with plastic.
2. Green manure. There are many varieties of green manure available in the allotment shop. It acts as a "living mulch" which covers the ground, thus reducing the need to weed. The roots of green manure improve soil structure and prevent soil erosion. Digging in the green plants then provides nutrients into the soil, reducing the amount of compost needed in the spring. Try field beans, mustard, phacelia, clover, rye.
3. Cardboard and manure. Use sheets of cardboard (with any tape removed) to create a weed barrier and cover with manure. The cardboard will stop any weeds from growing, rot down into the soil by spring, and the manure will add much needed nutrients into your soil. There is green compost available on many sites which you can buy by the wheelbarrow.

Weed control

It's tempting to use black plastic throughout the growing season as a measure to deter weeds by covering the entire bed with plastic, cutting a hole and planting into the hole. Consider using a mulch to cover the ground and prevent any weeds shooting up. Look into the no dig approach to gardening as a general approach to reducing the number of weeds growing on your plot. I find that the bindweed still finds a way even growing under plastic sheeting.

Lining paths

It is tempting to use black plastic as a layer underneath a pathway of paving stones or woodchips. This may lead to water running off somewhere else, or paths becoming waterlogged in periods of high rainfall. Instead consider using cardboard under your woodchips, or simply consider a grass pathway instead.

To retain water

Using a layer of black plastic around plants will help retain moisture as less water will evaporate. Consider that it may also prevent water from getting to the soil when it rains, and

may cause water to collect in an unnatural way elsewhere, potentially causing flooding during heavy rains. Plants with longer roots won't get the water they need when growing under plastic. Using a natural mulch of green compost, hay or even woodchips has the same effect of aiding water retention, with the added benefit of adding nutrients back into the soil. You could also consider different sources of plastic for this purpose. We may need to buy bagged compost to supplement our own supply throughout the year, and these bags can be saved, opened up and used instead of buying a new plastic sheet to grow your vegetables in. This turns a single use bag into a multiple use piece of plastic.

I have it in my shed already

We can't really argue with this one. If you have plastic sheeting already in your shed, by all means go ahead and use it. There are so many benefits to using plastic sheeting on the plot and I'd be lying if I said I never used it. Use what you have, consider how you are using it and think of ways to make it last longer. Clean it and store it properly when not in use to prolong its life. When it is no longer in any shape to be used, think about how you are disposing of it and if there is any way to recycle. And consider if you really need to buy some more.

On a final note, a lot of these plastic-free ideas may be more friendly to your local critters and animal friends. Bees, bugs and other wildlife may appreciate grass paths, green manures or layers of mulch. I know we all complain about uninvited guests on the allotment but if something is not eating your plants, you're not really part of the ecosystem!