

Tending to the Garden

Tending involves the active and ongoing process of observing plants as they grow, and maintaining the garden in the appropriate conditions. When tending the garden, you can enjoy seeing healthy plant growth and learn to identify when a plant needs help to thrive.



1. Key Ideas

During the growing season we can observe both cooperation and competition for water, light and space amongst different living things in the garden.

The term weed is often used negatively to refer to unwanted plants in the growing space. Weeds are an important source of food for insects and particularly pollinators (such as bees). However, weeds may not be of direct use to humans while competing with the crops for water, light, and soil space.



2. Space

The amount of success growing food in planters or confined spaces like gardens is dependant on the plants having adequate space both above and below the ground in order to grow healthily.

Ongoing observations of seedlings as they grow are important as gardeners can check if such conditions are met.

In some cases, plants may be growing too close to each other and competing for light. If that happens, seedlings may be gently uprooted and replanted further apart. Overcrowding can cause plants to be less productive.



3. Making Observations

Pay attention to the appearance of the plant - does it look healthy?

Particular features may include:

- Strength of the leaves and stems - a healthy plant will have sufficient water content to ensure all green parts are strong and turgid
- Colour - discolouration of the leaves may be indicative of lack of nutrients in the soil
- Presence of pests and diseases



4. Plant Protection and Garden Hygiene

The garden space is inhabited by many living things. Some may be occasional visitors - cats or dogs for example may leave traces. Cat poo may need to be regularly removed from the growing space. The soil will also attract other plants which had not been intended to grow in the garden, such as weeds.



Consider how the garden may be protected from vandalism, the unwelcome visits of dogs, accidental damage or the feasting of snails. Some plants are more susceptible to attacks from pests, and may need to be protected using physical barriers or scaring methods for birds, such as a scare-crow.

5. Water

A watering routine will need to be established, especially if it is a dry spring or summer. This is because water stress can seriously impact plant growth and productivity.

Some plants are thirstier than others, and the speed with which a plant reaches its permanent wilting point will depend on the type of plant. The permanent wilting point is the point at which a plant can no longer recover from water stress. It is therefore important to consider the type of plant and the way that it grows - does it have a shallow root system for example, salads?

Salads are prone to bolting in dry weather, as are plants in the beet family such as spinach and beetroot. This means that water stress results in the plant 'going to seed' too early, before it has produced any of the tasty bits we want to harvest. Perennial plants with well-established root systems are less likely to need regular watering.