

Weeds

You can find excellent information on how to tackle weeds on the RHS website www.rhs.org.uk. Below is a gallery of weeds most commonly encountered at Brentham.

Perennial weeds



Couch grass

If you see a lot of grass on your plot, dig some of it up to ascertain if it is meadow grass or couch grass. Meadow grass is clump forming, and has small fibrous roots. It can be killed by burning or digging under. **Couch grass** on the other hand is difficult to dig up as it has very dense, mat forming, long rhizomeous roots that look like wiry spaghetti. These roots strangle other plants and compete for nutrients and water, so your plants will not thrive if you plant them among couch grass. Couch grass grows and spreads incredibly fast. As it regenerates through its roots burning or digging in will not kill it. There are several ways of how to deal with couch grass.

1. The fastest and easiest way to get rid of couch grass is also the most drastic as it involves the use of controversial chemicals. Strim the grass during the growing season and apply glyphosate. Wait for two to three weeks. If nothing regrows you can rotovate the plot and start planting veg. If new grass shoots appear wait another week, re-apply glyphosate to the fresh shoots, wait two weeks for them to die, then rotovate the soil and start planting. You will have annihilated the couch grass and any other annual and perennial weeds on your plot in one fell swoop.
2. If you don't like the use of chemicals you have three options:
 - a) cover the whole area with a black weed membrane. Wait for 8-12 months for everything underneath to die. While this is an easy option it means that you will not get much out of your plot while you wait for the weeds to die. In addition, allotment rules stipulate that your plot must be under cultivation. We therefore suggest that you cover part of the plot in weed membrane and start cultivating the other half using one of the other methods.
 - b) apply the no-dig method: strim the grass, then cover with two layers of overlapping cardboard. Top the cardboard with at least 20cm of clean soil or compost – 30 or 40 cm would be even better. Start planting. You can also use this method to create raised beds. The downside of this method is that it is very expensive unless you have access to large amounts of free compost.
 - c) dig up the couch grass with a garden fork removing as many of the roots as you can find. (Do this when the soil is moist but not waterlogged. It will be much easier than attempting to dig the soil when it is dry and rock hard.) Let the grass and roots dry, then burn. This is the cheapest but physically most difficult option. You will be digging up couch grass roots for many years to come as it will regenerate from even the smallest pieces of root left in the ground. However, on the upside, the more you dig your soil, the easier it becomes to get rid of and control couch grass, and your vegetables will grow much better.

3. Finally dig a 15cm deep trench around your plot to prevent couch grass re-infesting your plot.



Bindweed

Bindweed is a pest. It strangles other plants, shades them to death and competes for water and nutrients. If you leave it to its own devices it will soon take over. If you simply cut off the top vegetation it will put all its energy into developing its underground roots, only to come back with a vengeance. Bindweed has white, fleshy, brittle roots. It is satisfying and easy to remove these from the soil when you dig it over and to burn them, but be aware they have a tendency to break as you do so and will create new plants from even tiny pieces. As with couch grass, the longer you cultivate your soil, the easier it gets to manage bindweed without chemicals. Bindweed has pretty flowers. Don't be fooled by them! While couch grass rarely produces seed, bindweed is also a prolific self-seeder. So try and deal with it before it seeds itself all over your plot. Do not compost bindweed roots or seeds– they just don't die. The only reliable way to deal with them is to burn or bin them.

Other perennial weeds that regenerate from their roots and are therefore better dug up are **dandelion**, **creeping thistle** and **dock**. Dock has very long tap roots and is therefore difficult to remove without weedkiller once established, so don't let it seed or grow old on your plot.

Buttercups and **creeping cinquefoil** spread through creeping stems that root at intervals. Buttercups can easily be dug up with a weed grubber. Creeping cinquefoil is best eliminated through regular raking or with the help of a weedkiller.



Rogue gallery. From left to right: [Creeping Cinquefoil](#), [Buttercup](#), [Dock](#), [Creeping Thistle](#), [Dandelion](#)

Useful perennial weeds

Nettles and **Comfrey** can become abundant on neglected plots, but they are a sign that the soil is rich and fertile, and both can be put to good use. Nettles are a good compost activator and can also be turned into nitrogen rich nettle tea by harvesting the tops of plants and putting them in a bucket with water until they have decompose (2-3 weeks) . The resulting

liquid should be diluted 1:10 with water. It is excellent for leaf growth and acts as a general plant tonic.

Comfrey is rich in potassium and therefore encourages flowering and fruiting. Simply crush some leaves, steep in water for two weeks and then use in the same way as the nettle tea. You can also mulch fruit bushes or tomato plants with comfrey leaves.

A word of warning: both teas are very pungent! It is recommended to make them in lidded buckets to keep the smell contained until you use them, and also to exclude flies who will otherwise lay eggs in the buckets resulting in an unappetising, diabolical maggoty brew!

Annual weeds

Annual weeds are generally fairly easily dealt with and can be dug under, plucked from the soil and put on the compost heap, or removed as young seedlings by hoeing the soil. The latter is the fastest way to keep them in check. Regular hoeing at the beginning of the growing season pays dividends!

Common annual weeds at Brentham allotments include hairy bittercress, chickweed, shepherds purse, groundsel, fat hen, nipplewort, smooth cat's ear, sun spurge, wood avens, sticky weed and lambs quarters weed.



From left to right: Bittercress, Chickweed, Shepherd's purse, Groundsel, Fat hen



Nipplewort, Smooth Cat's ear, Wood avens, Sticky weed

If your plot contains any seeding weeds it is important to remove these as soon as possible. Most weed seeds are viable for seven years or more, so if you let their seeds fall to the ground you will be digging up their progeny for many years to come.

If the seeds are not ripe, you can strim the plot and promptly remove the cut off tops. However, if the seeds are fully ripe it is best to individually cut off the tops into a plastic bag, trying to catch as many seeds as you can. If you are looking at easy-to-deal with annual weeds you may not want to bother with this, but if you look at perennial or pernicious weeds it will definitely be worth your while.

Annual weeds can be dug under and left to compost in the soil, or dug up and put on the compost heap. It is always best not to add weed seeds to the compost – burn or bin them.