

Todmorden's Jenny Coleman spills the beans on successful planting and keeping volunteers onside.

Alas you cannot grow hindsight but here is a list of useful things Jenny would have loved to have been told:



1. TIME

Never underestimate the time it will take.

2. WHY?

Try and identify why you are growing things in these beds – it will probably be more than one reason and maybe different people will have different ideas. For example in Todmorden, the town centre beds are both to show locals what can be grown locally and how to do it, as well as to provide things for our vegetable tourists to see. Sometimes the two things are not always the same.

For example sweetcorn is not always easy to grow in Todmorden but it is popular and so photogenic!

3. WHAT?

Information boards and labels are essential. Let people know what you are doing and why. Not only because so many people cannot identify broad beans, or carrots or potato plants, but also because in turn they certainly don't know when they are ready to harvest - so it is all part of the learning curve. We, in Todmorden are trying but are still not good enough at this.

(Don't forget to explain if you have beds covered with manure or with polythene to warm them prior to planting.)

4. PLAN TO BE FLEXIBLE

Plan at the beginning of the season but be ready for quite a lot of your planning to have to be changed. It's therefore a good idea to keep a number of plants back to be planted into spaces as they occur.

5. LOVE 'EM!

Cherish your volunteers! Keep thanking them and telling them how valuable they are. Think about what will make their volunteering more rewarding for them. In the summer ensure you have water/squash available; in winter ensure you end in time for a hot cup of something. Have a 'thank you' event at least once a year – with cake!



6. BE PREPARED

Provide tools and gardening gloves, not all your volunteers will bring their own, many will not own them. Try to have a range of tasks each time both because people will have different skills; and because they will come in a range of clothes. What jobs do you give someone in white trousers she wants to keep clean???!?

7. FOREWARD AND FOREARM

Give as much information in advance as you can to your volunteers about the tasks to be undertaken, then they have more chance of being equipped and appropriately dressed.



8. NEVER TOO MANY

You will need at least six times more volunteers on your list as you can occupy on each work session, not everyone can come out each time.

9. NERDS NEED LOVING

Its most important cherish the person who looks after your website and your e-mail list. They are absolutely key to your communications with the volunteers. You will need to remind them about regular work parties and also about short notice call outs.

10. FORGET THE ABOVE – HAVE FUN!

Finally don't let any of this, or anything else put you off, just get started somewhere in a small way and it will grow.