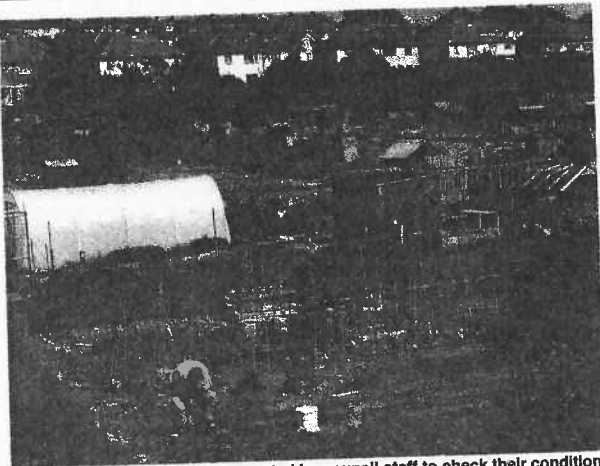


Picture: PEX FEATURES



VALUABLE: Plots are often inspected by council staff to check their condition

## By Simon Edge

ONCE upon a time the humble patch of earth rented from the local council for growing fruit and vegetables was a fading institution associated with wartime emergency cultivation and an age when few British people had gardens.

But in recent years allotments have been enjoying an extraordinary surge in popularity. That's partly because the drive to build high-density housing on brownfield sites means that plenty of residents once again don't have gardens of their own. But it's also fuelled by demand from affluent young professionals who want to feed their families on chemical-free food and who know that home-grown produce tastes much better than anything you can buy from all but the most expensive supermarket counters.

The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners represents the holders of a third of a million allotments and this week researchers from the University of Leicester revealed that people are being asked to wait as long as a decade-and-a-half for a patch of land to come free.

"I've had an allotment for more than 11 years. When I got mine I waited two months, now our waiting list is 15 years," says Dr Farida Vis who led the research project.

Here we look at what it is that delights allotment holders and how you can go about getting one if you want to join them.

### ALLOTMENT-FREE ZONES

All councils in England and Wales (except in inner London) have a legal requirement to provide allotments. If there are none in your area you need five like-minded people who would also like an allotment and are registered council-tax payers and you must all submit a formal letter, both jointly and individually. They can all go in the same envelope.

The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners gives details of what to do on [www.nsalg.org.uk](http://www.nsalg.org.uk)

### SIZE MATTERS

A plot is measured in poles or rods. This is the length from an ox's nose to the back of the plough it is pulling and it dates from medieval times when a ploughman would need to control his animals from the back.

A standard allotment is 10 poles or rods (which is shorthand for square poles/rods). For anyone who can't visualise the length of an ox and plough, that equates to 300 square yards which is 250 square metres.

### WHAT PRICE GROWING?

According to the research carried out by the University of Leicester the

cheapest place in the country to have an allotment is Bolsover in Derbyshire where they go for a penny a square metre (which works out at £2.50 a year). The most expensive is Runnymede in Berkshire - famous for its association with the Magma Carta - where the annual charge is 55p per square metre (£137.50). The average annual cost is 15p per square metre (£37.50).

### MAKING BRUM BLOOM

The place in Britain with the most allotments is Birmingham, which has 115 sites and nearly 7,000 plots. According to the latest research data the place with the fewest is the district of Blaby in Leicestershire, which has only 11 plots. To be fair to Blaby, demand is bound to be lower in a rural area where most people have gardens.

### STILL WAITING

There are an estimated 90,000 people in Britain on the waiting list for an allotment. The council with the longest waiting list per plots available is Wyre in Lancashire which has 307 people on the list and just 26 allotments; in other words they could allocate each plot at least 10 times over.

Daniel Salamon of Brighton has got around the waiting list problem by cultivating someone else's plot. "A friend of mine has had it for about six years but for various reasons he has been unable to look after it and I've been desperate to get my hands on one for a long time," he explains. "There's a massive waiting list for them around here - for the site where I am it's apparently about 12 years. That's because Brighton's full of hippies - we have a Green MP - and there are hardly any gardens. Now when a plot comes free they're splitting it in half, which I think is a good thing because to do a full-size one on your own as well as holding down a job is a big task. It's not so bad at this time of year but in the summer you've got to be there pretty much every day, if only to water it."

### DO'S AND DON'TS

The main rule for having an allotment is that you have to use it. If you don't maintain your plot there are plenty of people waiting in the queue who would dearly love to tend it in your place. In areas with long waiting lists there are monthly inspections to check that the patch of land is being used productively - with around 50 per cent devoted to produce - and that it is being maintained and not allowed to run to weed and seed. Those who do not manage to come

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# THE NEW LANDED GENTRY

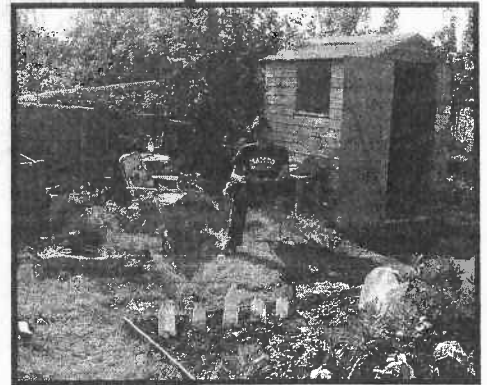
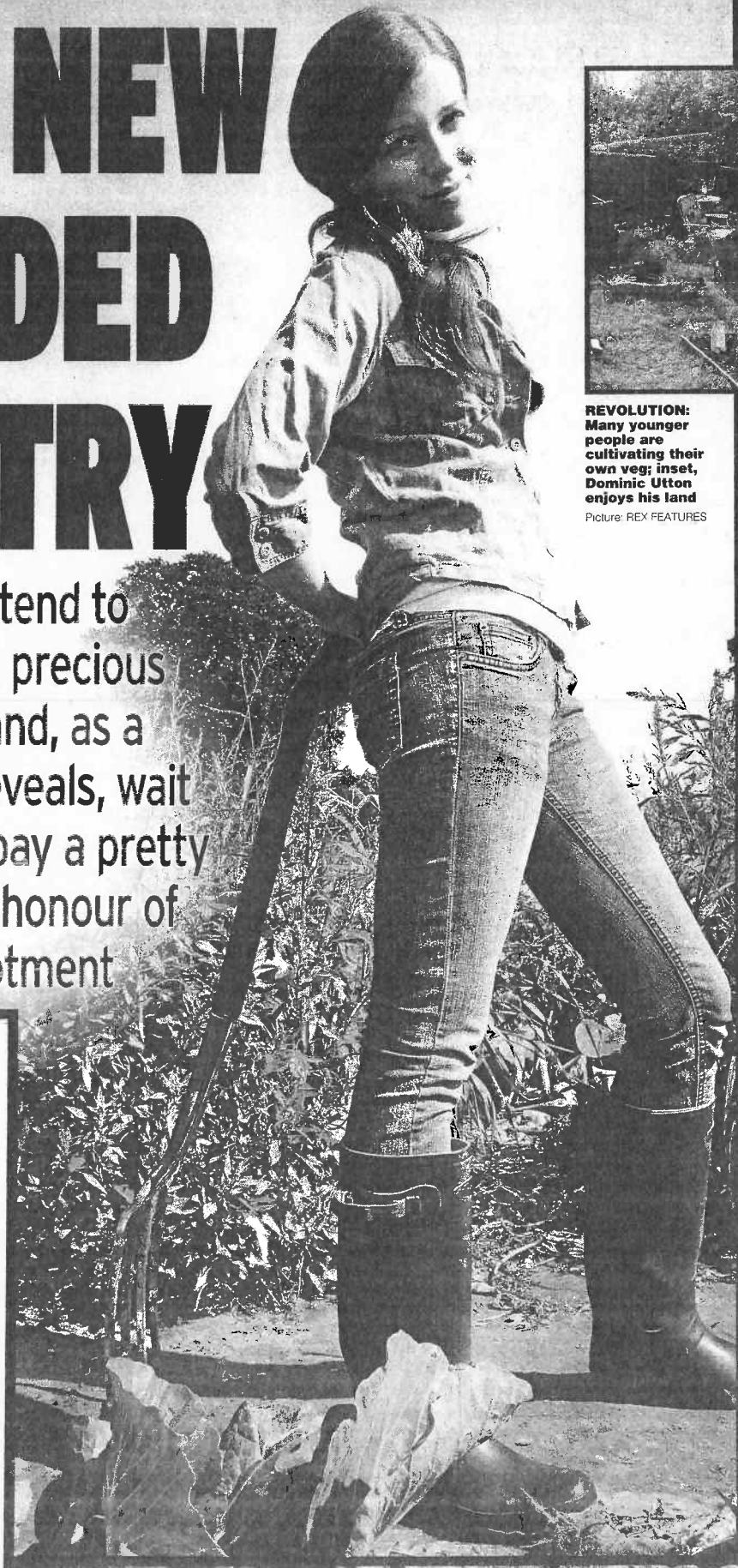
They lovingly tend to Britain's most precious plots of land and, as a new survey reveals, wait decades and pay a pretty penny for the honour of owning an allotment

up to the standard receive warnings and can eventually be asked to give up their plot.

But there are also unwritten rules that newcomers would do well to follow. On some sites, for example, those who have been there the longest get "first dibs" at the tap for watering. Sometimes there can be a culture of sharing equipment and tools but the absolute must is respecting other people's space. You don't step on to someone else's plot to inspect their produce without asking permission, whether they are there or not. It's like walking into someone else's garden - just plain rude.

#### SECURITY

Allotment holders may treat it as a cardinal rule not to invade their neighbours' space but thieves may not be so principled. On every site there are tales of people arriving to find that their veg has been dug up, while any sheds full of equipment are also vulnerable. Fitting a decent padlock is an obvious start but a determined thief will probably always find a way in - and the poorer the area the more vulnerable the site will be. You may also find more than you bargained for when you open your shed of a morning as it can provide a cosy berth for tramps.



**REVOLUTION:** Many younger people are cultivating their own veg; inset, Dominic Utton enjoys his land  
Picture: REX FEATURES

#### WHAT TO GROW

THERE are no hard and fast rules because to a certain extent it depends on the conditions at your site: how much sun or rain you get, what the soil is like, whether it's sheltered from the wind and so on.

However, there are also some basics to bear in mind when you're deciding what to plant. If it's cheaply available in the local supermarket there may not be much point in devoting time and energy to cultivating it when you could be growing something that would save you money. And if you don't want to spend your entire summer making chutney you may prefer to choose produce that will keep for a while if you have a glut.

Dominic Utton, who has had an allotment in Oxford with his wife Heidi for six years, has learned what works and what doesn't.

"We grow such things as butternut squash because they're so expensive in the shops and the plants cost almost nothing," he says. "You can get six or seven of them off one plant, which is about 15 quid's worth. We tend not to grow anything difficult because we have small children and we're not down there much. It's very much a question of 'stick it in the ground, keep the weeds off and water it'."

"The thing that really blows my mind is garlic. You plant one clove and it becomes a whole bulb again with no effort at all. Potatoes, too. You plant one little one and dig up 12. If you grow the right stuff you save a whole load of money. Spinach is also a good one. If you get the right plant it keeps on growing and you get spinach all through the summer."

"I learn a lot from the retired old boys who spend every waking moment down there, with every broad bean plant at exactly the same height and getting massive yields. One of them told me: 'The thing about gardening is that if you get it wrong this year there's always next year,' and that's very wise advice."