

Harrow in LEAF

Guide for New Allotment Holders

Also visit our website: www.harrowinleaf.org.uk



Harrow in LEAF

Harrow in LEAF is an umbrella organisation of allotment associations, horticultural societies, beekeepers, and other groups interested in horticulture within the borough. We were formed in 1998 to try and increase allotment uptake, and attained a large amount of grant funding to provide secure storage and equipment on some sites. We achieved charity status in 2005, with the aim of promoting horticulture in Harrow, and to protect and improve our allotment sites. We hold an annual show over the August Bank Holiday weekend, as well as other events such as the plant sale in spring.

Cultivating an allotment may be hard work, but the rewards are great – we hope that this booklet will be of some help to you, and that you enjoy your time on your plot as much as we all do.

If you would like to contact us, or join our organisation, the details are on page 18.

The Allotment Movement

The first mention of allotments in England was in the late 1500s when pieces of land were attached to tenant cottages in compensation for the enclosure of common land. The Enclosure Acts of the mid 1800s required provision of allotments, and these Acts were strengthened at the beginning of the 20th century, obliging local councils to provide allotment sites and consolidating the rights of ploholders.

The heydays of allotments were the two World Wars, when 1.4 million plots were in cultivation. The ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign led to an estimated 1.3 million tonnes of food being produced on these plots.

Since then usage has decreased, and by 1996 there were only about 300,000 plots available, but with the current interest in a healthy lifestyle, concerns about food miles, and worries about what goes into and onto our food, there has been an upsurge in interest in ‘growing your own’, so that now there are waiting lists for plots all over the country.

Now you've got your plot

The recognised measurement for a plot is described as '10 poles', which is 252 sq m, or 2716 sq ft. However, your plot might be 5 poles (a half plot), or a variety of other sizes. The size and position of your plot should be defined before you sign your tenancy agreement and it is essential that you go and look at it before you take it on. Some allotment authorities will plough or rotovate your allotment patch (for a fee) prior to leasing it to you, but this isn't always the case. You may find that your dream allotment starts out as an overgrown patch of weeds and brambles, with old broken tools, bits of wood and string hidden under clumps of couch grass.

Here are some tips to start you off.

Layout. It will help you to go around your allotment site and see how others have their plots laid out. Some favour beds, others rows, and some have their own ideas! But it pays to talk to others and find out why they chose their methods and to decide from this what method of growing is most suitable to you.

Those less able to bend may find raised beds useful. The width of beds should be considered too, as anything over 4 ft (1.2 m) will have you stretching to reach the middle. Also, by keeping the width down to 4 ft, you avoid walking on the soil and reduce the need to dig.

Will you have paths between sections? Will they be wide enough for your wheelbarrow? Will you plant crops such as dwarf trees, soft fruit, rhubarb and asparagus that will need to be put in a permanent position?

At least one good vegetable-growing book is essential (see page 8), but it is well worth getting to know your neighbours as they often have a wealth of knowledge and will certainly be able to tell you how not to do it if nothing else!

Clearing. It is tempting to go all-at-it and attempt to clear the whole of your plot before getting to work, but it's worth remembering that weeds will quickly grow on bare earth and by the time you get to the end of your plot the first bit will be an abundance of greenery, needing to be cleared all over again. Work a small section at a time and you should be able to

start growing crops straight away, giving you the motivation to continue with the hard work.

Once you have an idea of your layout you might have to start by clearing brambles and rubbish. Do this carefully, as it is not uncommon to find broken glass from old cold-frames amongst the rubbish left by the previous tenant. A large pair of shears, a billhook or a strimmer should be good tools to get the job done. Invasive plants such as bramble or bindweed should be burned or disposed of. Some species can grow back from as little as an inch of root so it is advisable to take out all traces as soon as you find them.

Once the area is clear, a good, strong spade and fork are needed to get you started. You could use cardboard, or weed-suppressing membrane, which you can get from your local horticultural suppliers, to cover a patch of ground you won't be working straight away, to keep the weeds down while you start on the rest. If you don't mind using chemicals on your plot you can buy a weedkiller containing glyphosate to clear the ground.

Whichever your preferred method, when tackling a plot that has not been worked for some time, you will inevitably have to dig, and dig, and dig some more. It can be back-breaking work, but doesn't need to be. If you haven't done much digging in the last 6 months you will need to work yourself in slowly. Don't be tempted to turn over large, heavy clods. Instead lift only a small amount and dig over using a fork to avoid cutting up invasive roots into smaller pieces.

As you feel tired, stop, and set about some other work, clearing or tidying, then come back the next day and do a bit more. You will gradually attain the strength in your back and arms to do more and more work and will be less likely to do yourself an injury.

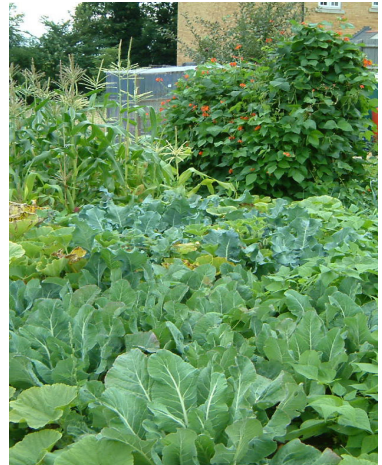
Rotovators can be used, but beware as they can chop up roots and spread unwanted weeds, increasing the problem. Digging out the long root-strings with a fork would be a far more effective way to remove them. Also, rotovators will only work effectively in certain types of soil, and will have varying results depending on the moisture content.

Once you have got out most of the weeds you can add manure, home-made compost or compostable material, then you can begin to sow

before clearing the next section of ground. If you choose to cut off the turf before working the soil, don't dump it. Turn the sods grass side down and make a pile. With time this will turn into valuable soil for use later.



From this...



...to this

Tools

A **spade and fork** are essential items to get you going. The smooth stainless steel ones are preferable to the rough-surfaced or painted type: they slide through the soil more easily and less clay sticks to them. Try to get ones with a handle length to suit your height, as this will considerably reduce the pressure on your back.

A metal-tined **rake** will break down the soil and prepare the beds for sowing.

A sharp **hoe** will enable you to keep the ground between rows of precious vegetable seedlings free of competing weeds. There are various designs, but choose one which suits you.

A **trowel or hand fork** is essential for planting and transplanting seedlings.

You may need **shears** to keep your path edges tidy, and a good pair of **secateurs** will be needed if you are planning to grow soft fruit that will need pruning.

Keeping your tools under cover will extend their life, and regular sharpening and cleaning will make them easier to use.

What shall I grow?

Grow what you enjoy eating, things that are easy (eg beans, potatoes, beetroot, Swiss chard, cabbages, salads, tomatoes, courgettes), that taste better from your garden (most things, but especially tomatoes, carrots, salads), that are only at their best when really fresh (peas, sweetcorn, beans, soft fruit, salads, broccoli), that are expensive to buy from the shops (asparagus, soft fruit). Maincrop potatoes are good to grow, but if you only have a half plot you may not have enough space. Whatever you grow, you can choose varieties for flavour rather than the commercially important yield, appearance and shelf life. Potatoes are said to help clear the ground (because you dig to plant them, then you earth them up, then you dig again to harvest them). You may like to grow flowers too, including ones that will attract insect pollinators as well as hoverflies, ladybirds and ground beetles that eat pests.

Planning your crops. When you first get your plot and have cleared a bit of ground, you will just want to grow something to get started, but soon you will need to plan where to plant things. Don't put in perennial plants such as soft fruit, rhubarb, or asparagus until you have got the ground more or less free of weeds—it's very difficult to get perennial weeds like couch grass, thistles and bindweed out of these crops. You will also need to think about crop rotation, to avoid following one crop with another that might suffer from the same pests and diseases or that will use the same nutrients in the soil. It also allows you to group together crops that will benefit from manure or garden compost dug into the soil.

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
No manure	Add manure	Add manure
<i>Roots</i>	<i>Brassica family</i>	<i>Others</i>
Potatoes, carrots, beetroot, parsnips	Cabbages, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale, cauliflowers, swedes, turnips	Beans, peas, tomatoes, salads, onions, leeks, sweetcorn, spinach, peppers, courgettes, marrows, pumpkins and squashes,

An example of a 3-year crop rotation; year 4 as year 1

Traditionally crops were divided into 3 or 4 groups, so that one type of crop did not return to the same place until 3 or 4 years later. However, these groupings may not fit in with your choice of what to grow, as many popular crops are in the 'Other crops' group, and will reduce flexibility in your planning—the important thing is to try not to grow a crop or a closely related one in the same place each year.

Growing from seed is the cheapest way for many vegetables and may be the only way for more unusual types. It will also give you a far wider choice of varieties. Some types of seed, for example tomatoes, leeks and cabbages, will remain viable for many years if stored carefully in a cool dry place, whereas others, notably parsnips, will not. However, if you only need a few plants or want to get a head start when you first take on your plot, you can buy young plants. They are available from garden centres, but allotment trading huts often sell them very cheaply, and Harrow in LEAF has a plant sale in spring with a wide variety of vegetable and fruit plants, including unusual ones, for sale. This will give you the chance to grow things that other people have started off in a greenhouse. Fellow plotholders may well offer you some of their surplus young plants.

Gluts and successional sowing Try to avoid too many gluts; plan so you always have fresh things to eat rather than a huge excess that you then have to freeze or give away. Don't plant too many of one thing—2 courgette plants and 20 runner bean plants might be plenty. Many things can be sown successionally—sow a metre row of lettuces, then another when you see them germinate. Sow some French beans in mid/late April, then some more in June—these will be at their peak as the others are declining. Carrots and beetroot can also be sown in succession to provide young tender roots over a long period. However, many winter crops, such as cabbages, leeks and parsnips, can be harvested from your plot over many months from a single sowing.

Catch cropping involves growing rapidly maturing crops, often salads, before or after the main crop, filling space that would otherwise remain empty, for example, before beans, tomatoes or courgettes are planted out in late May. The salads will be harvested before the next crop gets too big. Starting off catch crop plants in pots extends the possibilities. Careful planning enables you to use your whole plot all year. For example, broad beans and early potatoes may be harvested in early July

and can be followed by cabbages or other crops sown earlier and transplanted into the space as soon as it is available.

Intercropping can mean either using low-growing plants between taller plants, as in the combination of sweetcorn, French beans and squashes, or growing rapidly maturing crops between slower ones. For example, early salad crops can be grown between rows of peas, parsnips or Brussels sprouts, to be harvested before these have grown too large.

It is a good idea to buy a basic simple book, such as *The Vegetable Expert* or *The Fruit Expert*, by D G Hessayon, both of which are inexpensive and have information on such things as when to plant and how far apart. Your local library will have good books on the subject and there are several useful websites. You can also ask advice from fellow ploholders, who are usually very willing to help.

Although you should grow what you like to eat, every year try something new, maybe a few of something you thought you didn't like—you may be pleasantly surprised.

Warning--you will soon run out of space!



.... *Protect your crops.*

Organic Gardening

Many allotment holders aspire to organic gardening, working with nature to 'grow your own'. They often achieve this gradually, compromising initially while establishing a new plot. The two main principles used are feeding the soil, rather than the plant, and encouraging natural predators to control pests.

Feeding the soil with compost, leaf mould and manure also makes use of recycled waste and avoids the use of chemical fertilisers. Using barriers, deterrents and crop companions to reduce pests, weeds and diseases replaces the need for herbicides and pesticides.

Organic gardeners do not use artificial chemicals because they can kill pollinating insects like bees and pest predators in the food chain. Some partly organic gardeners use organic pesticides and fungicides sparingly. They are short lived, but may harm some useful insects.

Feeding the soil naturally

- **Add compost and manure** - recycle all your organic waste. If you do not make enough when you take on a new allotment then you need to buy it.
- **Mulch** - but only when the soil is already wet. Use materials such as compost, grass clippings, leaf mould, rotted muck, straw, or wood chips (6 months old), but not peat.
- **Grow comfrey** - use its stems and leaves as a mulch around tomatoes and bush fruit, or to make potassium-rich fertiliser. Never use on acid loving plants. Comfrey (or nettle) leaves may also be rotted down in water to make a liquid feed.
- **Grow green manures** (fast-growing grasses/legumes) - cut them before they flower and dig into the ground or use as a mulch. Green manures are often grown to protect bare soil in winter and as ground cover to deter weeds.

Feeding the soil naturally in this sustainable way also saves money. Rotating most crops is strongly recommended to maintain the soil quality and deter pests.

Natural pest, weed and disease prevention

- **Remove and burn** - all diseased material before it spreads.
- **Remove and destroy** - all heavily pest-infected leaves and vegetables. Pick off single pests and egg clusters from leaves and destroy.
- **Use physical barriers** - net fruit trees, soft fruit and brassicas to deter birds. Cover plants with horticultural fleece or fine mesh to divert flying insects, and use collars round the base of brassicas to avoid damage by cabbage root fly. Place barriers around carrots or grow them in raised beds; both need to be at least 60 cm high to prevent damage by carrot root fly. Cover with cloches but care must be taken to ensure regular watering.
- **Remove weeds physically** - to avoid the need for herbicides. But be aware that a small piece of a weed's roots may grow. Use a fork and pull the whole root out as a spade may chop the root into small pieces. The roots of perennial weeds should be rotted in a container of water before they are added to a compost heap.
- **Choose plants carefully** - to match the type of soil on the plot so that they will grow to be strong and healthy. Use resistant varieties where they are available.
- **Diversify** - Grow some flowers or let some crops and herbs flower. Grow plants that encourage friendly creatures and their larvae (eg bees, hoverflies, lacewings, ladybirds and beetles).
- **Clear the soil in autumn** - leave it bare for a few weeks to allow the birds to eat soil pests, their eggs and larvae. Use the frost to break up a recently dug bed that contains large amounts of clay. Otherwise cover the soil before winter to keep off the heavy rains and preserve its structure. (Cover with mulches, green manures, cardboard or black polythene and grow early onions and broad beans.)
- **Try these out – they might work!**
 - Plant tomatoes to clear couch grass.
 - Plant African marigolds to clear bindweed, ground elder and horsetail.
 - Plant nasturtiums to lure aphids away from beans.
 - Plant French beans among brassicas to deter cabbage root and leaf pests.
 - Interplant carrots with marigolds, chives or two rows of onions to deter carrot root fly.

Good Practice

When you were given the tenancy of your plot, you should have received a copy of the council's allotment rules. Courtesy to fellow ploholders and neighbouring householders is central to most of these rules:

- Only hand-held hoses may be used, not sprinklers.
- Keep bonfires to a minimum, and only use to dispose of diseased material and pernicious weeds – try to compost instead.
- Keep the weeds down to avoid them spreading to neighbouring plots.
- Don't bring anything onto the site that you aren't going to use, and do keep your plot tidy and safe.
- Keep the paths between the plots trimmed and clear.

Recycling is part of the allotment ethos, and you may find that all those odds and ends and pieces of timber that were lying around when you took over your plot could be used as stakes, to build raised beds or a compost heap, or to support netting.



.... *Recycling to build your compost heap and shed.*

Composting Almost the first thing to do on taking over a plot is to start a compost heap – the end product is a marvellous soil improver or mulch and will save you a good deal of money. You can do without a bin – just make a heap and cover it over with cardboard or polythene. However, a square wooden bin is easy to make and manage. Ideally make two bins

side by side: one will be rotting down while you fill the other. The bins should be built directly on to the soil surface. Hammer in 10 x 10 cm posts, or anything strong enough, at the corners of an area approximately 1 m square, and then nail planks on three sides, leaving no gaps. The front can be planks that can be slotted in to allow easy access to your compost, and the heap should have a lid or cover to retain heat and prevent it becoming too wet.

The different materials should be added in layers, and an occasional sprinkling of soil will introduce bacteria to get the process going. If you fill the bin in one go, cover it and leave it; it will build up a great deal of heat and break down quite quickly. Adding little bits at a time will produce a cooler heap, which takes longer to rot down. Turning the heap after about three months will introduce air and help the rotting process. When your compost is brown, crumbly and sweet-smelling, probably after 6–12 months, it will be ready to use, but don't worry if it's not perfect – just sift out any large pieces of unrotted material and use them to start the next heap.

To make good compost, add

- most of the plant material from your allotment
- fast composting waste, such as soft growth and young annual weeds
- things which take longer to rot, such as cardboard, twiggly and older plant material
- uncooked vegetable peelings and newspaper from home
- wood ash.

Don't add

- diseased material and perennial weeds such as couch grass and bindweed – if they fail to compost completely you may just end up spreading them around. These can be left to dry and burned instead, or the weeds can be rotted in water to make a nutritious feed
- cooked food

Leaves can be added to your compost bin, left to rot separately in a simple container made from chicken wire and stakes, or put into a bin bag punched with holes. This makes leaf mould in a year or two - a wonderful ingredient for potting composts.

🌱 It's not all for show

As you get more proficient you might like to think about entering a local show. Harrow has a tradition of Horticultural Shows going back more than 100 years. Several of the local societies listed on page 19, as well as Harrow in LEAF, have shows, usually in the summer or autumn, and it is always interesting as an allotment holder to visit these and see what other people are growing. You may well feel that something you have grown is as good as the vegetables, fruit and flowers you see at the show. So why not enter something the next year? Show secretaries can answer questions, and fellow exhibitors are usually happy to help someone new. Harrow in LEAF has a free leaflet on showing and there is information on our website. Once you have plucked up courage to try, you will probably find you enjoy it and want to enter again the next year, and maybe even become addicted.



.... This could be your award next year.

Pests & Diseases

If you were to consider all the pests, weeds and diseases that can affect your crops you probably wouldn't think it worth bothering. Luckily, in any one season the chances are that you will only come across a few of the vast array of pests and diseases that are just waiting to declare war on your delicate little vegetable plants.

Listed below are some of the more common **Pests**:

Aphids – These small green or brown insects suck the sap of the plant with devastating effects. They deposit a sticky honeydew on which disease spores can stick, so causing further problems.

Blackbirds – The only time they are a problem is when soft fruit is ripe. The most effective way to deter them is to use netting positioned so that they cannot perch on it and still access the fruit.

Big Bud Mite – This pest is prevalent on blackcurrants and causes the buds to swell up. The buds should be removed by hand and burnt. It also transmits the reversion virus, which reduces crops.

Cabbage White Butterfly (Large and Small) – The problem is not the butterfly but the caterpillar, which has a voracious appetite. Check the leaves of cabbages when the butterflies are about; the off-white or yellow eggs are usually laid on the lower surface. With your fingers rub off the eggs and any small larvae which may have hatched. Covering the target plants with horticultural fleece or fine netting should prevent the butterflies laying their eggs in the first place. Netting should be held away from the leaves, otherwise the butterflies may reach them.



Cabbage white butterfly eggs

Carrot Root Fly – The creamy-yellow larval stage of the carrot fly is very destructive, first burrowing around the outside and eventually tunnelling throughout the root. Parsnips, celery and parsley can also be attacked.

The female flies lay their eggs in the soil beside the host plants. These hatch about seven days later.

These insects are low fliers, rarely going above 50 cm, so the plants can be surrounded with a polythene barrier about 60 cm high, or covered with garden fleece. Lifting the crop in autumn limits the damage. Sow the seed very thinly to reduce thinning as they are attracted by the smell of the crushed plant, and sowings in late summer or in early spring for harvesting in the summer should be at lower risk.

Cutworms, Leatherjackets, Chafer Grubs, Wireworms, Millipedes – All of these pests attack the roots of plants below the ground. They are more commonly found in newly cultivated ground. Once the soil is in regular use, they will be brought to the surface by hoeing and the birds will gladly finish them off for you.

Pea Moth – This is a common pest of peas but is only a problem between June and August. The adult lays its eggs when the peas come into flower and the grubs then feed inside the forming pods.

Slugs and Snails – There are 29 species in Britain, most of which live on the plants we like to look at or eat ourselves! Traps can be made from upturned pots, empty grapefruit skins or wet sacking; the slugs take cover underneath and can be collected. They will also lay their eggs here so these can be destroyed as well. Ordinary table salt is lethal to slugs, but overuse is detrimental to plants and other creatures. Beer traps should have the entrance about 3 cm above soil level to prevent ground beetles falling in - put a few twigs inside to help them climb out if necessary. An alternative to beer is milk or a mixture of sugary water and yeast. Soot can also form a good barrier.



Slugs tend not to cross anything made of copper, therefore a continuous barrier of copper around vulnerable plants should keep them out. When hunting for slugs use a half-and-half mixture of vinegar and water in a hand sprayer; one squirt should kill them.

Whitefly – These small white flies can be a real problem. They are particularly fond of brassicas in the open. They congregate on the underside of the leaves and deposit a sticky honeydew, on which sooty mould can grow. When the leaf is touched they take off in a mass, only to land on another nearby plant.

Wood Pigeon – Wood pigeons are a pest to the gardener as they can devastate brassica crops. Protect vulnerable crops with netting, but use a fine mesh to prevent the butterflies from laying their eggs.

.....and now for the **Diseases:**

Blossom End Rot – This causes the bottom of tomatoes to turn black. It is a physiological disorder related to calcium deficiency. Regular and even watering helps to prevent the problem.

Club Root – This devastating disease affects brassicas, swedes, and wallflowers. It is caused by a soil-borne fungus that causes the roots to thicken and distort. It is much worse on badly drained and acid soil. It survives in the soil indefinitely and can be transmitted via the soil stuck to your boots to other areas of the plot.

Parsnip Canker – This disease causes brown marks around the neck of the root. Use only resistant varieties.

Potato and Tomato Blight – This first shows as black or brown blotches on the leaves or stems. In more severe cases the plants turn yellow and eventually die. The potato tubers can be saved in the early stages if the top growth is cut to the ground, removed, and burned, though the tubers may be small. Tomato fruit will become brown and inedible; infected fruit and plants must be destroyed.



....*Tomato blight can devastate your crop.*

Reversion – This virus disease, which is found mostly on blackcurrants, causes a change in leaf shape and the leaf buds to become red. It is spread by the big bud mite and once infected, the plants slowly get worse. There is no cure and affected plants should be dug up and burned.

Strawberry Mildew – This is a common disease of strawberries and causes dark patches to appear on the upper surface of the leaves with a silvery grey mould on the underside. The fruit can also be affected. Spray with a fungicide at the beginning of flowering until the fruit starts to colour. Remove and burn all foliage after harvesting.

White Rot (onions) – This shows as a mouldy growth near the neck of the onion, which then rots. Remove bulbs and do not put into store. Spraying with a fungicide may help if caught early enough.



...You can grow some flowers as well as vegetables on your plot.

Contact Us

Website: www.harrowinleaf.org.uk – This is packed full of information about allotments and other horticultural matters.

Email: info@harrowinleaf.org.uk

Telephone: 07968 417367

Other Useful Contacts

Most allotment sites in the borough have a representative to the local council or to Harrow in LEAF. The rep's contact details can be found by phoning Harrow in LEAF or on the 'allotment sites' page of the website. You will also find a list of other useful contacts on the website.

Council Services Harrow Council provide and maintain the boundary fences and gates, the main central path on the site and water pipes and taps. They will cut the main areas of grass, but not the paths between plots.

The council's central switchboard number is 020 8863 5611

Joining Harrow in LEAF

If you would like to join Harrow in LEAF and support us in our work to promote and improve allotments and horticulture in the borough, please cut off the slip below and return it with your remittance in the sum of £2, (correct at time of going to press), made payable to Harrow in LEAF, to The Membership Secretary, 35 Eastcote Road, Pinner, HA5 1EL.

Name

Address

.....

E-mail

Telephone

Local Horticultural Societies

There are thriving horticultural associations on many of the allotment sites. These are a good source of seeds, fertilisers, netting and all your other gardening needs at discounted prices. Many of them also organise outings and talks, and some have their own annual show. Further details of these societies, and other local groups with horticultural interests can be found on the Harrow in LEAF website.

Belmont Horticultural Society

With trading hut on the Belmont allotment site
Entrance 23/25 Weston Drive, Stanmore

Hatch End Horticultural Society

Chairman: 020 8428 2430

Headstone Allotment and Garden Association

With trading hut on the Headstone allotment site
Opposite 125 Pinner View, N. Harrow

Headstone Horticultural Society

Trading hut at junction of Long Elmes and Headstone Lane, N Harrow

Newton Park Horticultural Society

Trading hut on the Newton Park West allotment site
r/o 321 Alexandra Avenue, S.Harrow

Roxbourne Horticultural Society

Trading hut on the Yeading Ave Allotments
95/97a Yeading Avenue, Rayners Lane

Streamside Horticultural Association

Trading hut next to the Streamside allotments
Whittington Way, Pinner

West Harrow Allotment and Garden Association

Trading hut on the West Harrow (Large) allotment site
Path by the side of W Harrow station, The Gardens, W Harrow

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