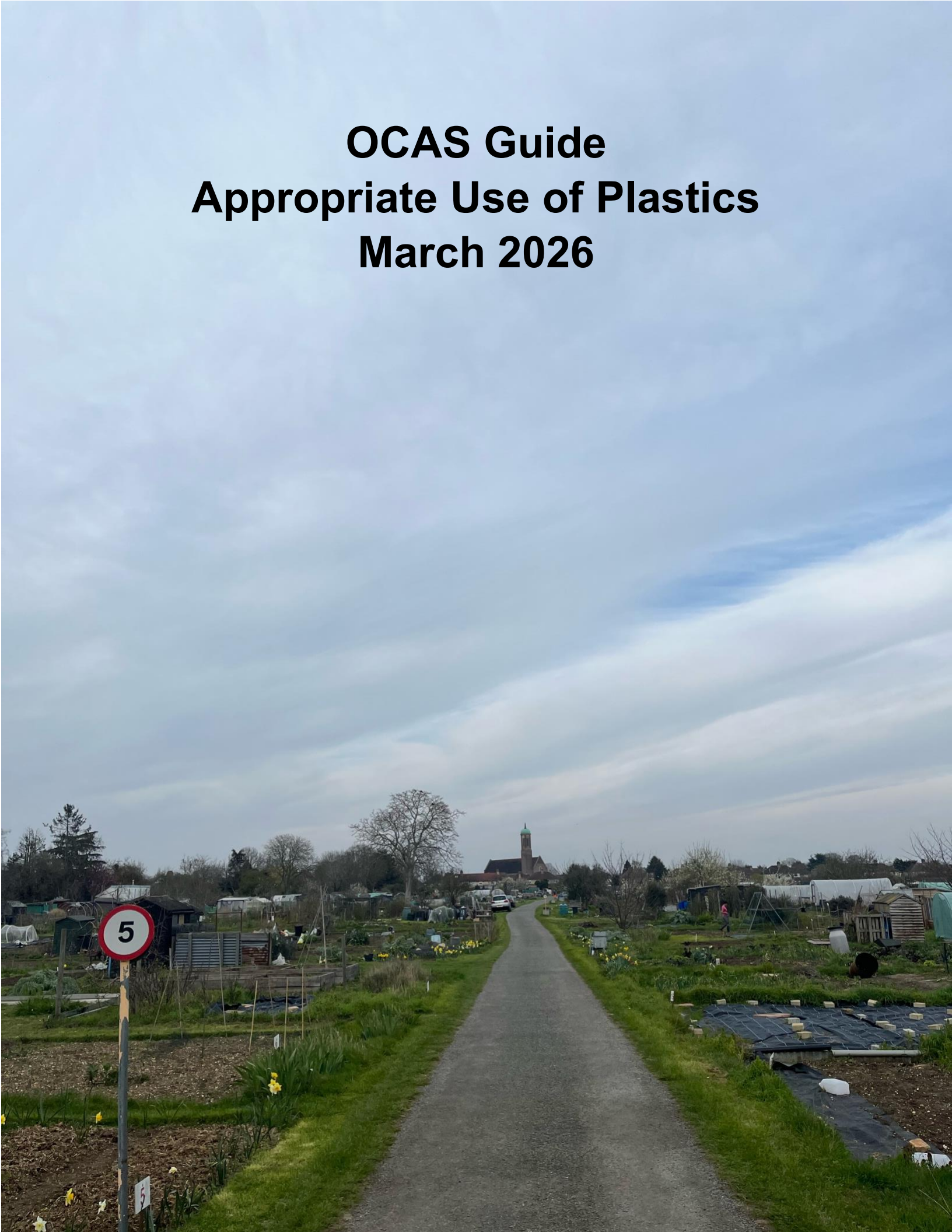


OCAS Guide

Appropriate Use of Plastics

March 2026










1. Introduction

Plastics are widely used on allotments because they are cheap, mostly durable, lightweight, and effective. However, their production, use, and disposal have negative environmental impacts. This guide explains those impacts, describes the types of plastics and sets out best-practice principles for using plastics responsibly on our allotment site.

2. Types of plastic

There are 7 classified types of plastic, made in different ways or using different ingredients. Plastic is often stamped with a number from 1 to 7, indicating whether or not the item can be recycled. These are the same stamps you would see on other plastic items such as food trays or drinks bottles and are known as 'resin identification codes'. Different plastics are made as they have different material properties, making them better for certain applications.

Type and symbol	Name	Examples	Locally recyclable?
	Polyethylene terephthalate	Water bottles, some finer netting	Yes
	High Density Polyethylene	Watering cans, water butts, compost bins, durable netting	Yes
	Polyvinyl Chloride	White water pipe hoops, drainpipes, guttering	Yes -but requires specialist recycling
	Low/Medium Density Polyethelene	LDPE - compost bags MDPE - blue water pipe	Yes - but requires specialist recycling
	Polypropelene	Plant pots	Yes - but requires specialist recycling
	Polystyrene	Mostly used in packaging	No
	Other	DVDs, sunglasses, nylon	No

3. Environmental impact

We all know that everything we do has an environmental impact, positive or negative. Some of the environmental impacts from the production and use of plastics are discussed below.

3.1 Production

- Most plastics are made from fossil fuels and the production is a highly energy-intensive process
- Manufacturing plastics contributes to carbon emissions and climate change.

3.2 Degradation and microplastics

- Most plastics do not biodegrade; they break down into smaller fragments polluting air, water and soil.
- UV light, weather, physical damage and soil activity can create microplastics that remain in the soil, air and oceans for decades harming ecosystems and human health through chemical leaching and microplastic contamination in food chains.
- Microplastics can affect soil structure, soil organisms, and potentially crop health.

3.3 Wildlife risks

- Loose netting, plastic string, and broken containers can trap or injure birds, mammals, insects, and amphibians.
- Lightweight plastics can blow off plots and enter hedges, ditches, and waterways.
- Many animals might mistake plastics for their natural food and ingest plastics which they can not pass.

3.4 Disposal

- Councils are not able to recycle many of the plastics we dispose of and around 11% end up in landfill.
- Contaminated plastics (with soil, compost, or chemicals) are mostly not recyclable and can cause whole batches of otherwise recyclable material to be sent to landfill.
- Poor disposal leads to pollution on and beyond the allotment site.

4. Principles for responsible use of plastics by plot holders - REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

Plastics are a wonder material. They are cheap, durable and can be made into many useful items from rigid watering cans to thin, light and flexible netting. Moving away from plastics to natural materials can be challenging as natural or non-plastic alternatives can be more expensive and can't be used in exactly the same way - terracotta pots for example might need more frequent watering compared to a plastic equivalent as the terracotta is porous.

Ultimately it is up to you to decide what you can change. Below are some thoughts on how you might be able to reduce, reuse and recycle to reduce the amount of plastic you use.

4.1 REDUCE

- Avoid unnecessary plastic where natural or long-lasting alternatives are suitable
- Use seed trays made from cardboard or paper rather than plastic
- Consider using cardboard or biodegradable mulch/matting rather than geotextile matting that fragments and can leave strands of plastic in the soil
- Use a natural mulch such as green manure which keeps weeds down but also adds nutrients and locks in nitrogen
- Use natural string rather than plastic string
- Do not use single-use plastics where reusable options exist
- Avoid very thin sheeting and netting that tears quickly and sheds fragments into the soil
- Secure plastics properly to prevent wind damage
- Do not use carpet or vinyl as ground cover

4.2 REUSE

- Reuse pots, trays, bottles, and containers for as long as they remain safe and functional
- Share surplus items with other plot holders
- Repair items (e.g. tape polytunnel covers, mend water butts) rather than replacing them
- OCAS will store left behind compost bins, water butts, piping, guttering that can be reused by ploholders
- Secure and store plastics properly to prevent wind damage or blowing away

4.3 RECYCLE

- Remove all plastic material from the plot no longer required or damaged
- Dispose or recycle broken plastic items on plots promptly
- Do not bury plastics in the soil where they will fragment or leech chemicals over time
- Clean plastics before recycling where possible
- Check local recycling rules, as not all plastics are accepted
- Do not burn plastics under any circumstances

5. Alternatives to plastics

Where practical, consider materials that break down naturally or can be recycled more easily:

- Cardboard or clay pots and trays or wooden trays with seed blocks
- Wooden or metal plant supports
- Wood or stone plant labels
- Natural fibres (jute, sisal, cotton) instead of plastic string
- Cardboard or thick paper (without tape or coatings) for temporary weed suppression
- Metal or wooden edging instead of plastic
- Glass cloches or recycled timber structures where safe and suitable

6. Shared responsibility on the allotment site

This short guide was written to help you know a little more about plastics, the impact plastics have on our environment and how we can reduce their negative impact on our allotment site. Everyone is responsible for how they use plastics and a small change in plastic use, be it fixing a broken water butt rather than buying a new one or moving away from plastic seed trays and plant labels will help!

Responsible plastic use helps:

- Protect soil health and wildlife
- Maintain a tidy, safe, and attractive site
- Reduce long-term environmental damage
- Set a positive example for other growers and visitors