

Planning the perfect polytunnel

You can grow almost anything in a polytunnel, and some things can grow all year round. But, where do you put it, how much work is involved in getting started and what are the costs? **Geoff Stebbings** explains

Despite their rather lacklustre reputation, a polytunnel is not just a cheap alternative to a greenhouse; it has many benefits that make it better for growing many crops. It isn't by chance that large areas of Spain are covered with polythene; peppers, chillies, aubergines and tomatoes seem to love growing under plastic and my best-ever crops of all these plants have been grown in polytunnels.

So, how practical are they and what should you look for? First you need to select a site, preferably in sun and on good soil since you will be planting straight into the soil, rather than in pots as you might in a greenhouse. When working out the size, allow at least 60cm around the frame, because the cover is often secured by digging out a trench and placing the soil on

the edge of the cover. Even if you have a wooden-based frame like mine, you will need access when you replace the cover. A cover should last three to four years before it needs replacing and some clear space will make it much easier. Designs vary but the height at the edges will often be restricted, so the wider the better. With a central path, a 3m-wide tunnel will give you 1.2m beds each side, enough for three tomato plants in each row, and I would recommend a 3m or 3.6m-wide tunnel where space allows. Another point to remember is that it's much easier to regulate temperature, and avoid fatally high temperatures, in a large structure than in a small one. Buy one that is as long as you can make room for and afford, remembering that increasing the length isn't as expensive as you might think.



Above: Securing the overhead ridges to the hoop.

Below: Marking out the area with string will ensure straight lines.

Far right: The finished polytunnel



You don't have to cover the structure with plastic. You may decide that net is sufficient, and this is ideal for brassicas where you want to keep birds off. And by filtering the wind a net cover will help promote growth. However, a plastic cover will keep crops dry in autumn and winter, allow you to dry onions, squashes and chillies and provide shelter and warmth. Where possible, choose a 'thermal' anti-fog cover, which will help retain warmth and has a longer life than cheap covers.

You will also need to consider ventilation and, although you can add side-vents, I have always found that having a door at each end, unless you have a very long tunnel, is sufficient.

One item that is usually sold as an option, but is essential, is anti-hotspot tape, a foam tape that protects the cover as it passes over the frame.

Once that is sorted you can add crop bars, which make it easy to support tall plants, base rails and anchor plates, all of which improve the structure.

So how much will this cost? Before I shock you, I must emphasise that a good polytunnel is not the same as a cheap plastic-covered greenhouse with a flimsy frame. A polytunnel



Geoff Stebbings trained at Kew Gardens and was a Head Gardener before he started writing. He has written several books and writes regularly for a number of national garden magazines, he also lectures around the country, in addition to growing a wide range of unusual plants, fruit and vegetables in his garden and allotments.



Right: Getting the hoops into the anchor

Below: Putting the cover over the hoops

should last decades, though the cover will need to be replaced periodically. My polytunnel, in its most basic form, with a thermal cover cost £500 and is approx 3.6m by 9m with two doors but, with extras, cost £700. A tunnel 2.4x6m should cost about £300. These are guides only and prices will



What your tunnel can do for you

SPRING

Harvest winter salads and the last oriental greens. Sow summer cabbages for transplanting. Sow early veg. Plant potatoes for an extra-early crop.

SUMMER

Grow cucumbers, melons, tomatoes, aubergines, peppers, basil and others. Pick early-sown French beans, courgettes, lettuce and other salads.

AUTUMN

Dry and store onions and shallots. Store squashes. Sow and crop salads and autumn-sown leaves.

WINTER

Pick salad and leaf crops and winter radishes.



vary according to supplier, frame gauge, cover and extras.

What to grow?

Having almost convinced you of the need for a polytunnel, it's time to talk about the exciting bit: crops.

Mediterranean crops such as peppers, aubergines and tomatoes, as well as chillies, tomatillos, Cape gooseberries and many more, can be unreliable in the open garden. Anyone who has tried to grow an aubergine in a pot on the patio will know the excitement when you pick the third fruit. In a polytunnel you have the worry that you might get bored with them, the plants will be so fruitful. Tomatoes, including those big beefsteaks (my favourites), will also thrive and will not be prone to blight.

The soil will warm more quickly in spring and the cover will keep off a few degrees of frost so you can plant

Suppliers

My tunnel was bought from **First Tunnels Ltd**,
Dixon Street, Barrowford, Lancs, BB9 8PL

Other suppliers

www.polytunnels.com, tel: 01622 873110

N A Kay's Horticultural Products, Unit 10,
Sneckyeat Ind. Estate, Hensingham, Whitehaven,
Cumbria CA28 8PF Tel: 01946 692134

Citadel Products, 32 St Andrews Crescent,
Stratford-upon-Avon, CV37 9QL
Tel: 01789 297436

out much earlier, achieving earlier and heavier crops. Because the soil will be drier and warmer in March you can sow early crops and get a crop of radishes, carrots, salad leaves and lettuce before you even plant your tomatoes and peppers.

And at the other end of the year the cover will be beneficial too. Given protection from frost and wet, autumn sowings of salad leaves such as corn salad, land cress, lettuce, endive and chicory and all the oriental veg will keep in perfect condition for you to pick for winter salads and into spring.

And then there are the crops you have never even considered before. A polytunnel makes growing melons and watermelons a certainty rather than a risk and you can grow your own sweet potatoes. Cucumbers and



gherkins will thrive, and exotic vegetables such as yard-long beans, okra and even loofahs are no longer a gamble but reliable.



Above: Grow your best-ever crop of tomatoes in a polytunnel

Top left: Chillies thrive in the warmth of a polytunnel

Top right: An autumn sowing will ensure good crops of corn salad throughout winter

Other considerations

Your life will be much easier if you have a supply of water nearby because the plants, even though grown in the ground, will need irrigation. I am keeping my fingers crossed because my tunnel is on an allotment and a hail of hot ashes will cause superficial damage to the cover – don't site your bonfire too close. But at least I shouldn't have the trouble I discovered when I had a tunnel in the garden and my cats decided they loved lying on the top in the summer; having first climbed up the sides, making a trail of holes.

Give yourself time to build it and have someone to help. It took two, energetic days for two people to complete my structure.

A polytunnel is a considerable investment but, if you're serious about wanting to produce your own crops, knowing what they have been fed and sprayed with, you should give one some serious thought. Personally, I think they are worth it just for the tomatoes; big, tasty, red, pink or orange ones picked warm from the sun, with a handful of fragrant basil from the plants beneath. Summer was made for this. ■



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RRP £9.99

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