

Ready, Steady, Grow!



Do you need a polytunnel? Jayne Neville, author of *The Polytunnel Companion*, takes us through the basics to show us what we can do right now

WHY A POLYTUNNEL OVER A GREENHOUSE?

Greenhouses have been the mainstay for growing undercover along with cold frames for a long time. The main benefits of polytunnels include getting a bigger area for growing over glass because they are much cheaper. They are much cheaper to run and repair and the shape of a polytunnel makes growing a larger quantity of crops easier.

DO THEY BLOW AWAY?

No. Does your greenhouse blow away? A modern greenhouse is not that much heavier than a polytunnel. Commercial polytunnels are huge and professional growers cannot afford to see them blowing down the valley. If you live in very exposed places you can buy special bars to anchor the tunnel even more than normal.

HOW LONG DO THEY LAST?

The higher gauge polythene now lasts

from anything between four and ten years. Our readers have said that their skins seem to last for around seven years, but these are older tunnels and manufacture has improved since then. The cost of recovering a tunnel is around £100, some more, some less, depending on size.

You can improve the life of your tunnel by making sure the skin is taught, you have adequate heat conducting tape and keeping it free from algal growth.

ARE THERE PLANNING IMPLICATIONS?

Not unless you are planning to cover a whole field with polythene, or you live in a conservation area. You are not governed by planning restrictions in an ordinary garden. Some allotment societies allow polytunnels, others don't, and these rules are usually set between the Local Authority and the Society.



There are few planning restrictions unless you want to cover the whole countryside with polytunnels.

HOW DO I REPAIR THE POLYTHENE?

If you tear the polythene then it is easily repaired using special adhesive repair tape. Do not be tempted to use anything other than the specific tape sold for the purpose. Carpet tape rots the plastic and looks awful; Sellotape doesn't stick properly and falls apart.

Untreated tears will just get worse once the wind has a chance to move it about, so don't think of the tear as extra ventilation – it doesn't work.

THINKING TIME

Right now is a great time to have a think about what's worked for you over the past year, and just as importantly what didn't. Maybe you have a greenhouse, maybe nothing – but how are you going to change your gardening with a polytunnel installed? If there was something you wish you had grown that you think you need a tunnel for – have a good think and plan it through. Of course you can grow two hundredweight of tomatoes – but can you use them all? Plan to do something about it now. Pretty soon the time will be short once all the sowing and growing begins in earnest again.

EXTEND THE GROWING SEASON

You can grow all sorts of quick maturing vegetables such as pak choi, radishes, and salad rocket in the tunnel for harvesting in early spring if you set them over the winter. The point of a big tunnel is that they extend your growing season.

You may have over-wintering crops in place too. Things such as hardy lettuce, corn salad, winter varieties of radish, Swiss chard, chicory, endive and spinach will keep your polytunnel productive. Even crops that would normally survive outside can also be grown in the tunnel if you have the space; the advantage being you can harvest in relative comfort even on



frosty days. Kale varieties can be grown as a cut-and-come-again vegetable for use as baby leaves in salads or can be

are ideal for use in stir-fries or can be steamed or lightly boiled.

Strawberry plants can be planted up in the polytunnel beds. The runners ▶



How do you put them together?

The frame is set first – then the doors, then the polythene is stretched into position.

The whole process is complete when the plastic is taught – nothing to flap about in the wind.

Basically it is a three stage process. Firstly you fix the anchors in the ground. The

hoops are attached to the anchors and then finally the skin is stretched over the hoops. There are some minor things to do to make the tunnel last longer. These include using anti hot-spot tape to the hoops and making sure the skin is taught.

The skin is buried into a trench on

either side of the tunnel and doors are fixed to the ends of the tunnel. It is not a simple project, but well within the reach of the average gardener. If you are stuck, or unable to build the tunnel, you can pay a few quid and get your company to build it for you.





► they produce freely each year can be used as replacement stock and replanted. Harvesting early strawberries from the polytunnel is one of the highlights of the growing season for many gardeners, as crops can be produced as much as a month earlier than those grown outside. The birds don't get them either!

POLYTUNNEL MAINTENANCE

Your polytunnel is about to embark on a busy and hopefully productive growing year, and will no doubt need a bit of routine maintenance to keep it in shape.

Let's start with the structure itself. The polythene will definitely need a thorough clean inside and out. This is a job for a rainy day as the outside surface of the tunnel will already be wet and all you need is a long-handled mop or soft broom to remove the algae and dirt. Otherwise use a hosepipe to wet the surface before you wash it down. If the cover is particularly dirty, dunk the mop in warm, soapy water that should soon shift the grime. Don't be too harsh though, especially if the cover is an old one. A stepladder is essential for reaching the polythene along the ridge – otherwise you'll end up with an unattractive dirty stripe running along the roof of your tunnel! (Please don't fall off!)

Cleaning the inside cover is a lot more pleasant, but it is a good idea to

clean the polythene with a disinfectant such as Citrox. Dairy farmers might like to know (and anyone else for that matter) that udder wash is ideal for cleaning inside the tunnel. It is basically Milton (and

when I think of a way of passing a low voltage current through a bucket of salt water – I'll show you how to make it for 2p a gallon... Paul)

Good hygiene will reduce the chances of pests and diseases next year.

Once both sides are completely clean, you are ready to mend any rips or tears in the sheeting. Special polytunnel repair tape can be purchased from the polytunnel manufacturers, and it's a good idea to always have a roll at the ready for emergency repairs throughout the year. Needless to say, dry weather is essential to carry out repairs on the cover. The adhesive on the repair tape is extremely sticky so try to get the position right first time! Small puncture holes are easily fixed; larger rips and tears are trickier, and really a two-person job – one to hold the damaged polythene in place whilst the other applies the repair tape.

Wear and tear on older polytunnel covers usually occurs around the doorframes where the sheet is pulled tight and tensioned. Repairing this is slightly more tricky than a straight patch-up elsewhere on the cover, but a timely repair job now before the winter gales set in could postpone buying a replacement cover for yet another year!

One part of the tunnel subjected to wear and tear on a regular basis are the doors themselves, whatever form they take. Regular maintenance will keep

them in good order. The simple roll-up blind doors are usually held in place by wires running vertically down both sides. These wires can be re-tensioned and the closure catches tightened so that in high winds the doors won't flap about. Wooden hinged doors too will need checking and strengthening to ensure they can stand the rigours of winter. Most important is that they stay firmly closed when required.

INSIDE THE POLYTUNNEL

First of all, give the soil a thorough de-weed, clearing up any debris and plant remains from the previous crop. Weeds and old plant matter can harbour all kinds of pests and keeping your polytunnel weed-free all year round should be your aim. Dig over any soil which isn't going to be used over the winter to tidy it and break up the surface. A bit of organic compost or well-rotted manure can be incorporated to beef up the soil – intensive polytunnel production in the heat of summer can make it thin and dry, and depletes it of essential nutrients. Adding organic matter will help it retain moisture and add nutrients for next year's crops.

Any seed trays, pots, benches and staging should also be given a clean using one of the above disinfectants. If they aren't going to be used for some time, then put any trays and pots away in the shed. Snails in particular like to spend the winter hidden



away, ready to emerge and feast on your young plants in spring. Don't allow it to happen!

HEATING

The average polytunnel is around three times the volume of the common-garden greenhouse, and this produces a number of problems if you want heat for tender plants, exotic fruits or growing seedlings. One of the factors involved, especially if you are using the polytunnel to grow food, is the cost of heating the whole tunnel.

You can buy all sorts of heaters, fan assisted electrical ones, oil fired convactor types, overhead ones, long radiator piped ones. They come in all shapes and sizes and are usually powered to match the size of your tunnel. Expect to pay between £100 - £300 for good heaters, depending on size. If you are not in a smokeless zone, a good second hand wood burner is ideal, partly because you can brew up on it!

BUT POWER COMES IN OTHER FORMS...

SUNLIGHT

The major heat source for tunnels has to be sunlight, which will increase the air temperature, even on the coldest of days. On average the wintertime difference between inside and outside your polytunnel is six degrees. Often

this is even greater. The temperature dramatically plummets at night, so some kind of heat sink – a storage heater will prove a real benefit.

A good deep path, at least 30cm (12 inches) made from coarse stones and topped with paving slabs if necessary, will collect heat to be radiated back into the greenhouse at night. Moving tender plants and seedlings to the path in the evening will protect them from plummeting temperatures. It will remain a degree or so warmer near the path than anywhere else in the tunnel.

HOT BED

This method of heating soil is over 250 years old, and has found its way into the language. The horticultural hotbed is a trench dug to at least 75cm (2ft 6 inches), and is at least 60cm (2ft) wide and the length of the bed you want to use. (A lot of digging!) The bottom of the bed is then filled with fresh cow manure to a depth of at least 30cm (1ft). The rest of the hole is filled with good quality soil. As the manure rots down it generates heat that warms the soil.

In the spring the bed can be dug out and the soil put onto the rest of the plot, allowing another hotbed the following year. Some Victorian systems had pipes going through the hotbed carrying the heat away to the rest of the greenhouse. ✨

