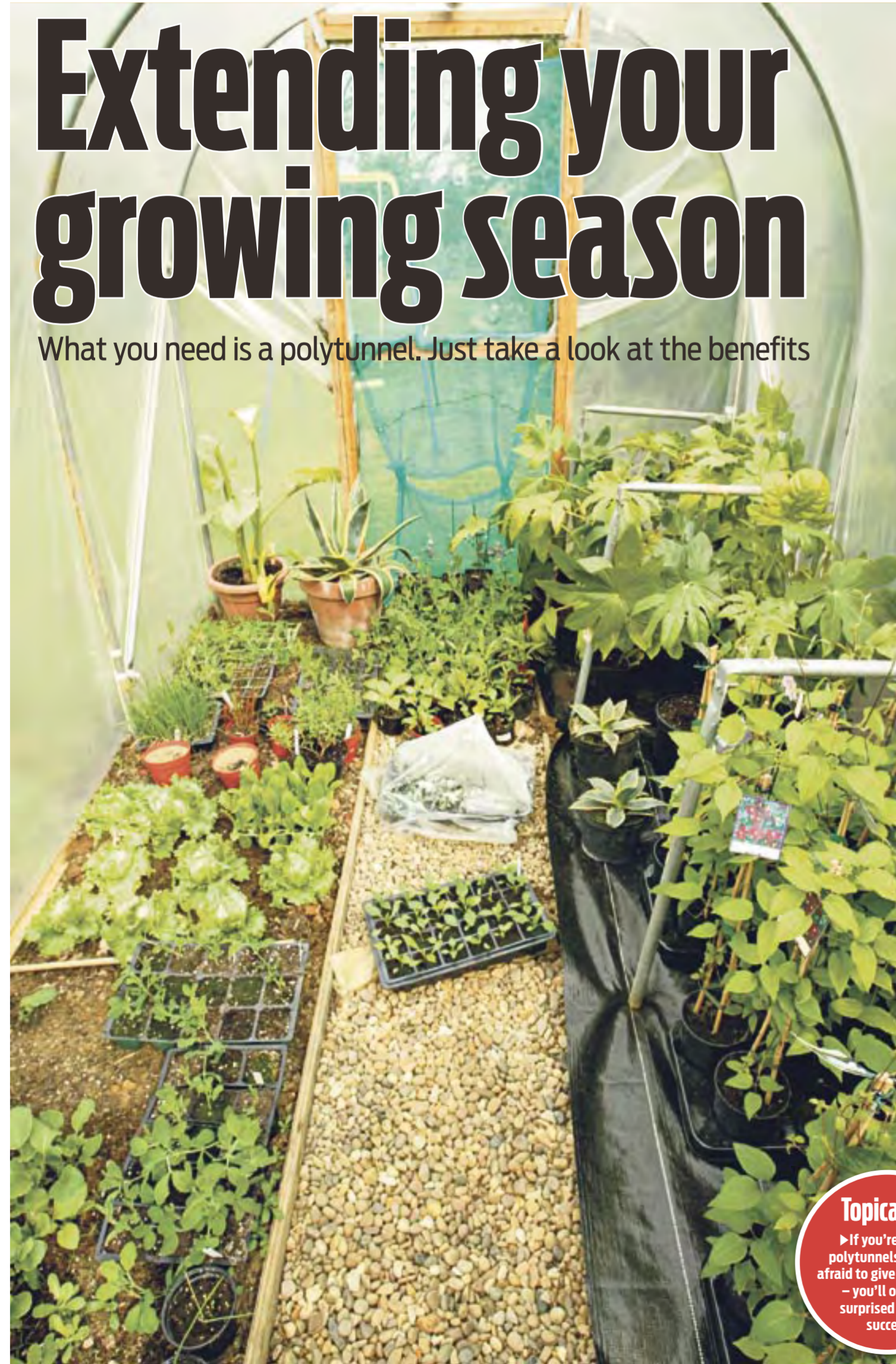


Extending your growing season

What you need is a polytunnel. Just take a look at the benefits



Early sowing offers perfect, blemish-free carrots

By Helen Billiald
helen.billiald@emap.com

OUTSIDE it's still winter. Yes, there's the odd fraudulent sunny day, but there are plenty of chilly days still to come. Yet in your polytunnel, spring has already begun.

If your first crops each year are warmth-loving tomatoes, chillies and cucumbers, you're missing out on an entire early harvest. Late February in a tunnel equates to early April outdoors, so it's the perfect opportunity to squeeze in some early crops.

And in case you've got a touch of tunnel envy, there's the chance for you to win a top of the range one worth £500 on page 32.



Scrub polythene inside and out

Getting your tunnel ready

If your tunnel has been sitting empty since last autumn, now's the time to give it a thorough clean. Wash down the plastic covers inside and out to ensure the maximum amount of light gets through. Also keep an eye out for any holes, however small, and patch them up with repair tape before they have a chance to grow.

Next, dig over the length of the tunnel, getting rid of any perennial weeds that have inevitably crept in from outside. As you work, add as much well-rotted organic matter as you can – I include a wheelbarrow to every square metre. You're asking one small patch of ground to work incredibly hard, so finish with a sprinkling of general purpose fertiliser such as blood, fish and bone or Growmore. This is a good time for other tunnel maintenance jobs, too. For example

Topical tip

► If you're new to polytunnels don't be afraid to give things a go – you'll often be surprised by your success.



Broad bean flowers will bring a touch of fragrance

edging soil beds with timber, installing an irrigation system (far easier when the tunnel is empty) scrubbing down staging and adding crop bars. Check too that you have some fleece ready for extra cold nights, slug and snail pellets to protect young seedlings and mice traps or finely woven wire netting if you're sowing peas and beans.

The early starters

Vegetables sown directly into your polytunnel borders now will mean a plentiful May/June harvest when the garden outside is bare. These early harvests are usually mercifully free from pests and diseases (this is the only time of the year I manage to grow perfect carrots).

Gardeners further north may need to hold back for a couple more weeks; it generally helps to think of the tunnel as being around six weeks ahead of the climate outside.

What to sow

Salad crops are made for early polytunnel life. Lettuce loves not-too-hot temperatures and since they're quick to mature your beds will soon be free for the tender crops that follow.

Cos lettuce 'Little Gem' grows well in spring



Sow peas just as you would outdoors



Glowing beetroot seedlings

Topical tip

► Carry out daily pest and disease checks to help you catch problems before they get out of hand.

and by leaving a short stalk behind when you cut the heads you should get a second flush of leaves. Alternatively, 'Freckles' is a pretty semi-cos which allows you to pluck individual leaves instead of the whole plant.

Along with lettuce, you can add rocket, radishes, spinach, sorrel, spring onions and lambs lettuce, plus mizuna, mibuna and mustard 'Giant Red' to be picked young for mild spicy leaves. It helps to sow a succession of short (1m/3ft 3in) rows at weekly or fortnightly intervals to make sure you get a steady succession of leaves.

Harvesting early carrots has to be my favourite spring polytunnel event. There's not a carrot root fly in sight! Quick-maturing varieties are the best choice, for example 'Early Nantes 2', 'Mini Finger' or 'Amsterdam Forcing'. Either sow them thinly into drills as you would outdoors or, if weeds aren't a problem try making the most of space and sow them broadcast.

Sow more than you'd expect since you won't be able to resist pulling them when they're the size of your little finger. Beetroot also does well as an early crop (they're beautiful picked small for early salads) so pick one that's quick maturing and won't be



Weekly sowings ensure a succession of radishes

inclined to bolt, for example 'Bolardy'.

If you've got the room now's the time to plant some chitted first-early potatoes directly into the borders. Space them slightly wider apart than you would outdoors as the foliage tends to get quite large and keep fleece handy for seriously frosty nights. You'll also need to ensure they get plenty of water, so it pays to scuddle around occasionally and check there's moisture at their roots. You'll be harvesting your first tubers in May.

The other early tunnel crops I wouldn't be without are the legumes, including broad beans, peas and mange-tout. Broad beans deserve to be grown for flower scent alone – in an enclosed space they're heavenly. Sow peas in their usual flat-bottomed drills and broad beans in double rows.

Their biggest threat will be the attentions of ravenous mice, but once they've reached the seedling stage they should be problem free. While there's no wind to knock plants over, you'll still need pea sticks or supports. Leaving the tunnel doors open during mild days once plants are in flower will encourage pollinating insects inside.

One small warning: It's very tempting to sow the entire tunnel at this time of year, but you're bound to need space over the coming weeks. There's also the danger of longer maturing crops overlapping with the next wave of summer crops such as tomatoes and peppers. Only trial and error will help you work out timings.

As a rule I try and leave half the tunnel free which is soon taken up with later vegetable sowings in modules (think French beans, courgettes and squashes in April), bedding plants destined for containers and hanging baskets and subsequent direct sowings in the tunnel (for example Florence fennel).

Don't forget to...

- Water the tunnel in the morning rather than last thing at night. You'll reduce the risk of fungal diseases taking hold.
- Open tunnel doors on mild days to let air circulate.
- Keep a diary of sowing dates to help you plan crops in future years.



Start hardy annuals in modules now

Sowing in pots and modules

YOU'RE almost bound to need space to sow early veg seeds into pots and modules. Modules are a useful way of bypassing pests and problematic heavy, outdoor soils where germination is erratic. It also allows the veg plot perfectionist to plant out lovely neat rows without any gaps!

Plants to sow now include broad beans, peas, lettuces, cauliflowers and summer cabbages. All of which can then be planted out later as strong young plants. The same method can be used in March for hardy annuals such as calendulas, annual poppies, sunflowers or cornflowers.

Sown early and regularly potted on you'll have chunky plants ready to plug border gaps in April or May.



On heavy soil broad beans are best started in pots

► Don't miss your chance to win a £500 polytunnel on the next page