



Nick outside one of Barnsdale's smaller tunnels – widths are standard but the length can be determined by the number of hoops you buy

# In praise of the Polytunnel

They may not be beautiful but boy are they useful for the kitchen gardener, as they extend the growing season at both ends. Two experienced polytunnel owners share their experiences and pass on tips for getting the most out of them

## Nick Hamilton



As part of a vegetable course I run at Barnsdale, I have a list of essential equipment for growing vegetables all year

round and our polythene tunnels are right up at the top with greenhouses. I certainly wouldn't be without mine.

Here at Barnsdale Gardens we have several different polythene tunnels, ranging from the smallest at 2.5m (8ft) wide and 3.5m (12ft) long, to a tunnel

that's 18m (60ft) wide and 12m (40ft) long. These are used in partnership with our greenhouses.

We find that polythene attached right down to ground level works very well for growing tomatoes and peppers as well as for hardening off vegetables, as these crops require a highish temperature to crop well. If we need to ventilate the tunnel there are large doors that can be opened.

Our tunnels on the allotment all have polythene down to the ground and these are used early in the season to harden off our vegetable plants in their passage



In autumn, Barnsdale's tunnels are used as a temporary store for onions and apples

from greenhouse to open ground.

However, for more ornamental crops and/or for hardening off vegetables later in the season, we attach a wooden rail to the hoops, about 90cm (3ft) from the ground, and attach the polythene to this. Then we attach netting from the wooden rail down to the ground, which allows excellent air movement throughout the tunnel.

## Moving with the seasons

In early spring we move several old slatted tables into our tunnels, which are useful for putting seed and module trays onto so that they are off the ground and easier to tend. Good doors are essential as plants still need protection during colder nights yet plenty of ventilation and a lower temperature during the day. On very cold nights we also supplement the tunnel cover with a layer of fleece.

By the end of June we remove the tables and put our tomato and pepper plants in. These are transplanted into large pots with a supporting string running from the pot to an overhead wire so that we can tie the tomato plants in as required. By the middle to end of September the tomatoes and peppers have finished and the tunnel becomes a drying area for onions,

marrows, squashes and even apples.

As we enter winter these tunnels become a dry area for cleaning furniture when it's pouring with rain outside, as well as being a store for all sorts of unnecessary odds and ends.

## Buying tips

The most important aspect to consider when buying a polythene tunnel is that the longer it is the harder it will be to ventilate. For growing crops like tomatoes, it's best to buy a couple of shorter tunnels than just one long one otherwise disease could turn out to be a real problem.

The great thing about tunnels is that you buy them by the width that you can accommodate in your garden – the length is entirely dependant on the number of hoops you purchase. Our 3.8m (12ft)-long tunnel, for instance, could just as easily have been 2.4m (8ft) or 12m (40ft) long.

There is also a range of hoop specifications; the larger the hoop the more able your tunnel will be to withstand wind and snow. We have some tunnels that are completely semi-circular in shape and others that have a slight peak at the apex, which is supposed to make it easier for snow to slide off, though we haven't really noticed any difference. Mind you, how often do we get big snowfalls these days? ▶



In June, tomato plants are ready to grow up strings attached to overhead wire



Good ventilation is essential during warm days, so tunnel doors must be left open

## Elisabeth Arter, polytunnel veteran



Since investing in my first 3x3.5m (10x12ft) polytunnel in 1978, I've grown a wide variety of kitchen garden crops in it, as well as in successors

in three different gardens. On my last move in 1999, when downsizing to a quarter acre, I decided there should be no polytunnel, but after a few months I soon realised what I was missing.

A polytunnel protects growing crops from wind, heavy rain, birds and some frost, and is a pleasant environment to work in on inclement days. Also, being comparatively easy to move, there is no risk of the build-up of soil-borne diseases, which, if you were working in a normal greenhouse, may involve changing soil.

The only real disadvantage is that a polytunnel is not a pretty sight and so is best sited where it can't be seen from the house or screened from view.

## Tasty treats all year round

The main advantage of using a polytunnel as far as I'm concerned is the opportunity to grow a wide variety of crops throughout the year. I've found it ideal for:

- Raising summer cabbage, leeks, Brussels sprouts and other vegetables for transplanting into the open garden.
- Growing to maturity early radish, spring onions, hearted and picking lettuce, first early potatoes, carrots and beetroot.
- Growing from seedlings raised in the greenhouse early and late climbing beans, indoor/outdoor cucumbers, tomatoes and peppers.
- Also for autumn to spring crops of baby leaf salads and picking lettuce, plus watercress grown in large pots standing in trays of water.
- Staging in the polytunnel is used to grow-on trays of half-hardy annual flower plants in late spring and overwinter plants raised from semi-ripe cuttings in summer.



You can also use a polytunnel to overwinter more tender plants in pots

## Assembly

Although a polytunnel is usually moved to a new site every three to five years, it needs firm anchorage against strong winds. I find this is best provided by attaching the frame to a minimum of four stout stakes inserted into the ground to a depth of 45-60cm (12-24in). The edges of the cover should be buried in a trench and anchored by lengths of scaffolding pole or other slim heavyweight laid on it before replacing the soil. Always choose a bright, sunny day for putting on a tunnel cover as it is more flexible and much easier to manoeuvre when warm.

## Budget advice

A new polytunnel frame and cover can cost several hundred pounds, but any DIY enthusiast can make one to suit their site and space. The frame can be made from sturdy waterpipe, stakes and a few bits of timber. If you live in an area where commercial growers use large polytunnels, you'll find they often have

spare polythene leftovers when renewing their covers, or will let you to take away an old one to salvage its good parts. A cover I acquired this way has lasted three years with no signs of tearing. ★

## Elisabeth's polytunnel tips

- Even in winter soil in a polytunnel can dry out quickly when the sun shines. I keep a dustbin full of rainwater in mine so that it warms up a little.
- Weeds grow through in a tunnel most of the year and must be kept under control.
- Good ventilation is essential as fungal problems can build up under polythene. It's advisable to have a door at each end.
- Early and late crops need one or two layers of fleece or other extra cover when night frosts are forecast.