



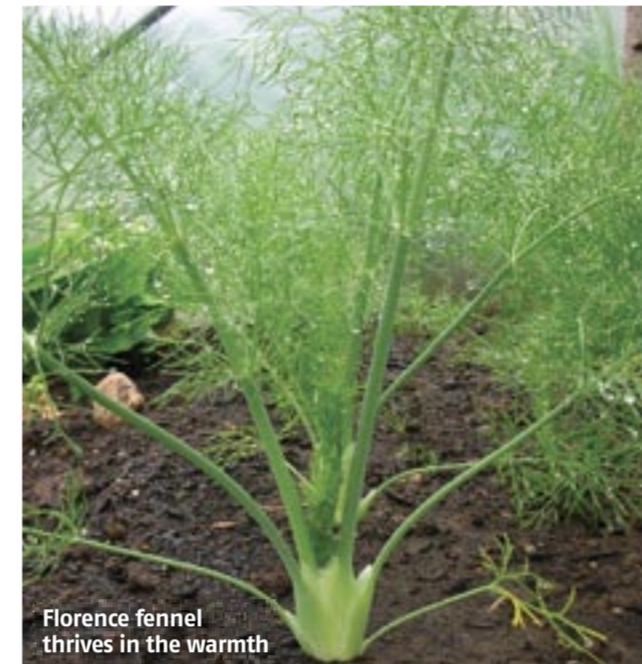
# Going under cover

Treat yourself to a polytunnel – it will transform the way you grow veg

GROW YOUR OWN VEG  
FINAL PART  
OF OUR SERIES



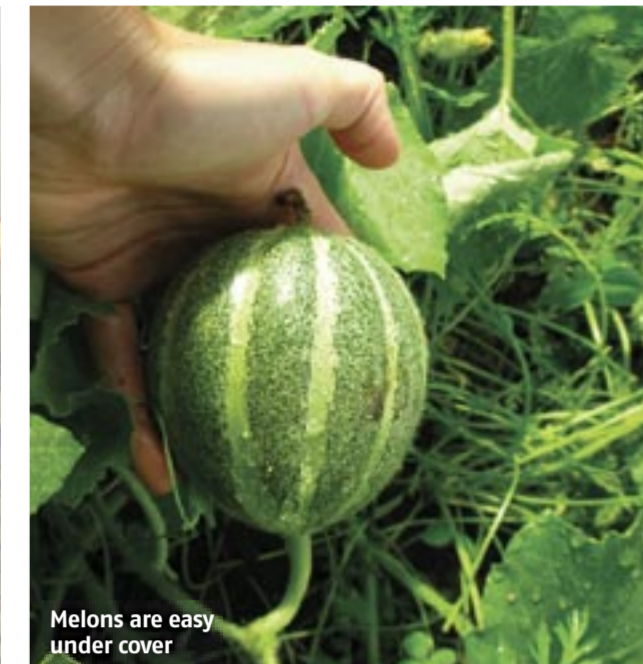
A polytunnel will transform your plot



Florence fennel thrives in the warmth



Mix flowers with your veg



Melons are easy under cover

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**W**HEN you've been bitten by the veg growing bug, there's one piece of kit you're guaranteed to drool over. Once you've got it in your head, nothing else will do – it's a polytunnel or bust.

And getting one is well worthwhile. Four years after I took the plunge, the rewards of polytunnel living have exceeded even my most enthusiastic hopes.

Polytunnels loosen the seasons' iron grip. Not only are your crops earlier (or later) but they arrive faster and larger. In April's 'hungry gap' you can be picking lettuce, rocket, radish, lamb's lettuce and the first slim columns of carrots, while broad beans and peas will arrive weeks before their exposed neighbours.

In summer, tender crops come into their own. After years of coaxing melons through a half-hearted sulk outdoors, I at last grew plants that actually thrived. These were joined by hoards of peppers, cucumbers and chillies, plus enough tomatoes to freeze for the entire year.

Polytunnels' cloche-like protection gives you the gift of gardening outdoors, indoors. When the rain is pouring down, there are few better places to hide and get on with some digging. And any sunshine on cold spring days transforms your bubble into May.

Polytunnels won't win any beauty contests, but they offer fantastic value for money and it's what's inside that counts. Along with direct veg sowings, a polytunnel makes a fantastic environment to bring on healthy plug plants. French beans, runners, sweetcorn, cabbages plus bedding for the borders all love being started under cover.

You can plant up hanging baskets and containers too, leaving them in a corner until the frosts are past. Pots of tulips also spend the winter there, escaping the attentions of local wildlife.

In fact the only area I don't trust my tunnel with is overwintering tender plants, as its size makes it too expensive to heat. For everything else, it has transformed the way I grow veg – so take the plunge and let a polytunnel do the same for you.

## TOP TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

BEFORE getting your own polytunnel, here are a few things worth considering:

### Size and site

The size of your garden or allotment may be the limiting factor, but try to go as big as you can – you'll find it's easy to fill the space. And remember you'll need enough space to walk around the outside of the tunnel for any repairs.

Ventilation is important in any confined space, so try not to go too long and narrow. The edges are least useful for crops, but picking a high-sided polytunnel will improve matters to some extent.

Choose an area that basks in plenty of sunshine, ideally positioning the tunnel running east to west. Mine is more north to south because of sloping ground – a polytunnel will cope with a slope running lengthways but not with a slope from side to side. If you garden on an incline, be prepared to do some serious levelling.

Remember your crops will rely on you for water – so for the sake of your back, make sure there's a standpipe nearby.

### Covers

Polythene covers come in plenty of types and qualities. A good one will last at least four years and should manage anything up to another six.

Look out for special thermal/anti-fogging polythene. Not only does it retain heat better, it reduces condensation and drips that can damage foliage or promote disease.

### Accessories

Plenty of add-ons are available to tempt you and your wallet, ranging from overhead irrigation to staging supports.

I recommend choosing extra-wide doors, both for wheelbarrow access and improved ventilation. And I regret not including crop bars for attaching cucumber or tomato supports.

### And finally...

Keep a supply of repair tape to hand – at some time you're bound to have a heart-stopping moment when you're not paying attention with the fork...

### Suppliers

- First Tunnels – tel: 01282 601253; [www.firsttunnels.co.uk](http://www.firsttunnels.co.uk)
  - LBS – tel: 01282 873333; [www.lbs-group.co.uk](http://www.lbs-group.co.uk)
  - Northern PolyTunnels – tel: 01282 873120; [www.northernpolytunnels.co.uk](http://www.northernpolytunnels.co.uk)
  - Citadel Products – tel: 01789 297456; [www.citadelpolytunnels.com](http://www.citadelpolytunnels.com)
  - Five Star PolyTunnels – tel: 01570 421580; [www.polytunnels.me.uk](http://www.polytunnels.me.uk)
- See pages 48 and 49 for further stockists



Adding staging supports gives you extra area for pots and containers



To improve ventilation, First Tunnels offer a ventilated ridge to circulate air

'When the rain is pouring down, there are few better places to hide and do some digging'



Without crop bars, you'll need sturdy canes to support tomatoes and cucumbers

## HOW TO ASSEMBLE YOUR POLYTUNNEL



TWO options are available for fixing your polytunnel to the ground.

The cheaper, but more labour intensive, system is trenching. This means anchoring the polytunnel by burying its polythene edges in a trench 30cm (12in) wide and 40cm (16in) deep.

Alternatively, fix the cover to timber base rails, with anchor plates at the end of each hoop to keep your tunnel firmly on the ground.

Although more expensive, this is the route I chose. The rails run around the base of the tunnel and save all that back-breaking digging – you just need to dig a hole for each anchor plate. It's also easier to tension the cover for a neat, tidy finish.

Polytunnels aren't complicated to build, but you'll want to get it right first time. Aim for a clean, level site before you even think about unpacking the kit. Then read and re-read the instructions – First Tunnels, who supplied my kit, included a tea bag for the purpose!

The hardest part is getting the tunnel square, which means each corner must measure exactly 90 degrees. Get this right and the rest is plain sailing.

It took three of us a weekend to get everything finished, so pencil in a couple of weekends if there are only two of you. Finally, pick a still day for putting on the cover unless you have plenty of strong helpers!

