

The sultry heat of the polytunnel is perfect for some exotic fruits

# Hot Under the Collar

IF YOU ARE looking for a passionate challenge, try passion fruit. Easier to grow than to fruit, you have to be careful when eating them because some contain cyanide when unripe. Fortunately the poisonous fruit tastes awful and you do get spectacular flowers.

*Passiflora edulis* is a fast-growing climbing shrub that will grow to 5m (16ft) if allowed. It holds itself in place by means of tendrils and flowers in this country from July to August. The flowers are used to illustrate the Passion of

Christ by missionaries in South America, from where the plant originates.

It will grow on any soil as long as it drains well and is fairly nutrient rich. It will not tolerate shade at all and in order to fruit it needs to be grown in the tunnel, although it will grow outside quite well in the south of England.

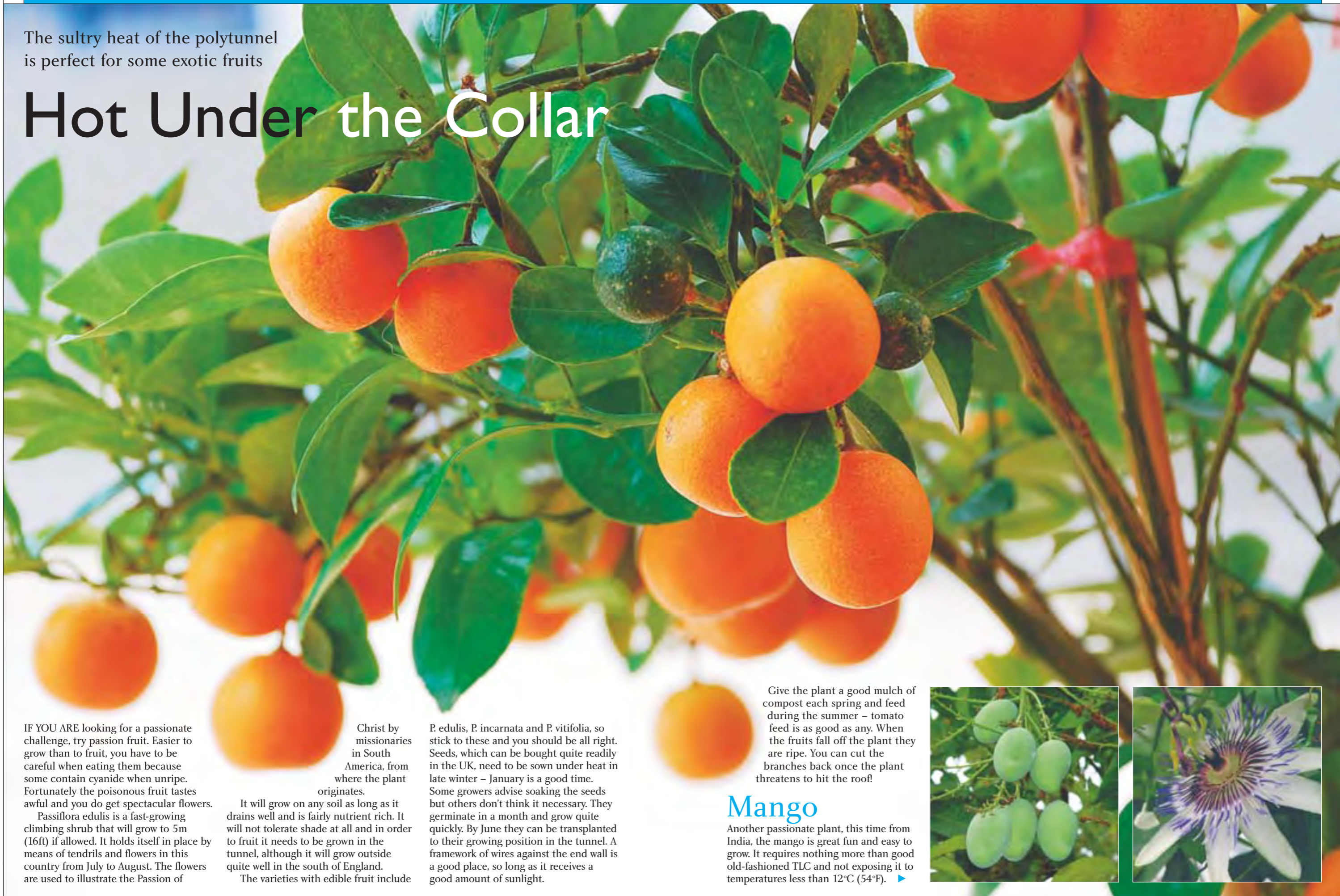
The varieties with edible fruit include

*P. edulis*, *P. incarnata* and *P. vitifolia*, so stick to these and you should be all right. Seeds, which can be bought quite readily in the UK, need to be sown under heat in late winter – January is a good time. Some growers advise soaking the seeds but others don't think it necessary. They germinate in a month and grow quite quickly. By June they can be transplanted to their growing position in the tunnel. A framework of wires against the end wall is a good place, so long as it receives a good amount of sunlight.

Give the plant a good mulch of compost each spring and feed during the summer – tomato feed is as good as any. When the fruits fall off the plant they are ripe. You can cut the branches back once the plant threatens to hit the roof!

## Mango

Another passionate plant, this time from India, the mango is great fun and easy to grow. It requires nothing more than good old-fashioned TLC and not exposing it to temperatures less than 12°C (54°F). ▶







► The mango is the most popular fruit in the world, with more being eaten year on year. There are 1,000 varieties of this fruit which has been cultivated by man for over 4,000 years.

For some reason the supply of mango seed for growers in the UK has suddenly dried up with very few suppliers now offering them for sale. No matter, you can get them from the supermarket.

#### GERMINATION

Buy your mango from the supermarket and cut out the seed. Enjoy the flesh! Clean the seed and rough it up with a piece of sandpaper. Place this in moist compost at around 15°C (59°F). Keep it moist but not wet. Within six weeks the seed will have produced a shoot – sometimes more than one in which case just cut out the weakest.

Transplant the seedling after three months of growth to a slightly larger pot and keep moist and fed with tomato food over the summer. Water every two weeks with rainwater – which they prefer. Only water in the winter to stop it drying out. After a year pinch out the growing tip, which will make the plant more bushy. You can repeat this on the other branches to create a plant that is happy being small. Mango trees in the tropics grow to 10m (32ft).

By the following June there should be flowers and in the late summer fruits should be ripening. Remove the fruit as late as you can at the end of summer.

## Citrus

The polytunnel is perfect for mimicking the environment needed to grow citrus fruits.

Members of the citrus family – oranges, lemons, limes, grapefruits and so on – are prized for their flavoursome fruits and vitamin C content. In fact, though, they contain no more vitamin C than most other plants, but this notion has stuck around since Georgian times when they were used by sailors to ward off scurvy.

When you think of citrus fruit, oranges and lemons immediately spring to mind. But it's possible to grow clementines, mandarins, satsumas, grapefruits, kumquats and limes as well. You can even grow bergamot – so you can make your own version of Earl Grey tea.

#### CONDITIONS FOR GROWTH

Make sure you provide a frost-free environment in the winter months. Cold, wind and rain combine to make these plants miserable, meaning they need to be brought inside in the autumn. They are tolerant of cold down to around 5°C (41°F), so an unheated room is ideal. Try

to keep them in the sunniest places, not necessarily for the heat it brings but because they prefer full sun.

Just because it's winter doesn't mean that citrus plants are going to 'sleep'. In fact, they actively grow during this period, and most of them flower in the winter too. An orange in flower on Christmas Day is a lovely sight!

You will need a large terracotta pot because it's porous and provides an amount of air to the roots. It needs to be a minimum of 60cm (2ft) tall for a small citrus tree and you can pot on from here as it grows. Clearly there will come a time when it isn't possible to move the plant around because it is too large. At this point treat it as a house plant and prune accordingly.

Fill the pot with a soil-based compost (John Innes No 2), incorporating some sand (say up to 15%) into the mix. All citrus plants generally need the same regime when it comes to watering and feeding. They don't like to stand in wet conditions but do enjoy moisture. Take care not to over-water, simply make sure the soil is slightly moist and that the pots are free draining.

Use a good-quality general fertiliser at least once a month – once a fortnight in spring. Some people use winter feed and a separate summer feed but as long as you use a good-quality, all-round fertiliser, this expense isn't necessary in my view. Feed less in the winter, just once every five to six weeks.

#### PROPAGATION

Most citrus plants will grow readily from fresh seed but will take around a decade to flower and fruit, sometimes two. Plants can be grown by taking hardwood cuttings in the autumn. Around half will 'take' and after a couple of years the trees might produce fruit. All citrus plants bought from garden centres and nurseries are grafted on to specialised rootstocks. The vigour this ensures means that they will grow to their full height very quickly.

Ask around and try to get the most dwarfing rootstocks you can.



#### RE-POTTING AND PRUNING

This is best done in the spring. Trim your plant just above a fat, lush-looking bud, so the tree takes on a good, roundish shape and remains at the appropriate height for your room and patio.

Re-pot yearly into the next size up. Take the opportunity to add some slow-release fertiliser and fresh, well-draining compost. Gently remove some of the soil and ensure there is plenty of crockery in the bottom of the new pot for drainage. Add new compost/sand mixture and firm in well. Give a good watering and keep the plant out of draughts/wind for a few days.

#### PESTS AND PROBLEMS

All citrus suffer from the same group of pests: aphids, red spider mite and scale insects. A weekly wash with soft soap will keep most of these in check. The plants drop their leaves regularly in the winter, but should not lose more than a third. Any evidence of yellowing leaves could be due to over-watering, lack of nutrients, low temperatures or insufficient sunlight. Keep plants well ventilated but out of strong draughts to avoid botrytis and other fungal infections. Above all, water well but don't allow them to stand in water.

## Oranges

Every navel orange is a descendant of a single mutant tree found in the early 19th century in Brazil. It was budded and the small plants sent around the world. They're very heavy fruit and, consequently, the trees need to be large to take their weight. The fruits are seedless and have a small 'baby' fruit inside them.

Blanco oranges are smaller and so can be borne on smaller trees. Most fruits can be harvested from November to December.

In June take the plant on to the

patio where it can stay until around the second week in September. You are looking to avoid wet, cold and driving rain but you can cover it with polythene because the end of September is often very warm. I have never had an orange outside in October.

## Grapefruit

Grapefruit first appeared in the West Indies – thanks to another mutation – in 1750, and were transported as buds all around the world. They were particularly prized by rich English landowners who grew them in hot houses, even though they can be dragged outside in the summer. The plants are larger than oranges and bear larger fruits. Otherwise they can be treated in exactly the same way.

## Kumquats

The fruits of this fast-growing tree can be eaten whole. They are also supposed to be good pickled in brandy. They grow to be quite large and so are kept in a single position.

## Clementines

These plants ripen around Christmas, most being ready after November. They can be kept quite small, even though they are vigorous plants. Annual trimming keeps them in check, but you can grow them up a wall or as a large bush.

## Limes

Limes tend to be easy to grow and can be restricted to a reasonably small tree about 1.7m (5ft 6in) high. There are a number of varieties and each grows well in the UK – some turning yellow when ripening. A limequat is a cross between a lime and a kumquat. You can eat the whole fruit, which tastes much like a lime. \*

