

My favourite tool

It may not be your average garden tool, but Garden News writer Helen Billiald has found her own little Eden inside a polytunnel – and now she's definitely hooked.



First Tunnels Polytunnel

A 20ft polytunnel is hardly your average hand-held gardening tool – in fact, my choice could be seen as a bit of a cheat. Yet, having made an inventory of every tool in my shed, there's nothing I would be as heartbroken to lose as my polytunnel.

Felco secateurs, my mother's weeding trowel, a perfectly balanced rake, all are well loved. But for pure revolutionary change, no piece of gardening equipment has ever come close to my beloved bubble of plastic.

Like many veg growers, I felt frustrated with seasons and yo-yoing abundance. Everywhere I looked people were singing the praises of polytunnels. Finally, one particularly bleak January, I took the plunge and ordered.

I'd spent hours deliberating its specifications versus price. One choice I'd recommend is using anchor plates and base rails instead of securing the

So what does it cost?

At First Tunnels (who supplied mine) a 10ft x 20ft tunnel, with thermal anti-fog polythene, timber base rail, anchor plates, wide doors and anti hot-spot tape, will currently set you back £511. If this is getting too pricey, the basic version with super-clear polythene and anti hot-spot tape costs just £362 – a bargain when you consider the growing area at your fingertips.



Cocooned in a cosy polytunnel, both Helen and her plants can feel the benefit.

HELEN BILLIALD

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cover in a trench. The anchor plates are simply buried at the base of each hoop, holding the tunnel fast, while the polythene is fixed to the rails. It costs more, but makes cover tightening a doddle, gives a neat finish and makes life easier when you replace the polythene (in anything from four to 10 years).

In this insulated little world you can feel your blood start to warm. The plants feel cocooned here too. Our first salads are sown ridiculously early; rocket, mizuna, cos lettuce, lambs lettuce, early carrots; brave little rows of impossible bright green. Later there are early potatoes in buckets; peas, beans and brassicas sown in pots; annuals and bedding for the

POLYTUNNEL EXTRAS

- **Crop bars** – steel bars fixed beneath each hoop give a handy support system for canes and wires.
- **Staging supports** – extra bench space makes sense in spring when the tunnel becomes a propagating house.
- **Thermal anti-fog polythene** – reduces internal droplets that can cause fungal disease.
- **Repair tape** – accidents happen, and so far I've
- perced the cover with a fork and a hazel stick. Keep tape handy for similar accidents.
- **Anti hot spot tape** – foam tape to go over each metal hoop, prolonging the life of the polythene.

garden, until every inch of every surface is covered.

Tomatoes have become an obsession, melons are rampant in the heat, while chillies, sweet peppers, aubergines and cucumbers keep the wider family in fodder for weeks. By autumn the freezer is groaning in protest and my arm muscles are

going on strike. Yet, for all its hard work, I wouldn't swap this remarkable little Eden for the world.

SUPPLIER

■ First Tunnels,
tel. 01282 601253,
www.firsttunnels.co.uk