



Flashback to last month...clearing the site, ready for action



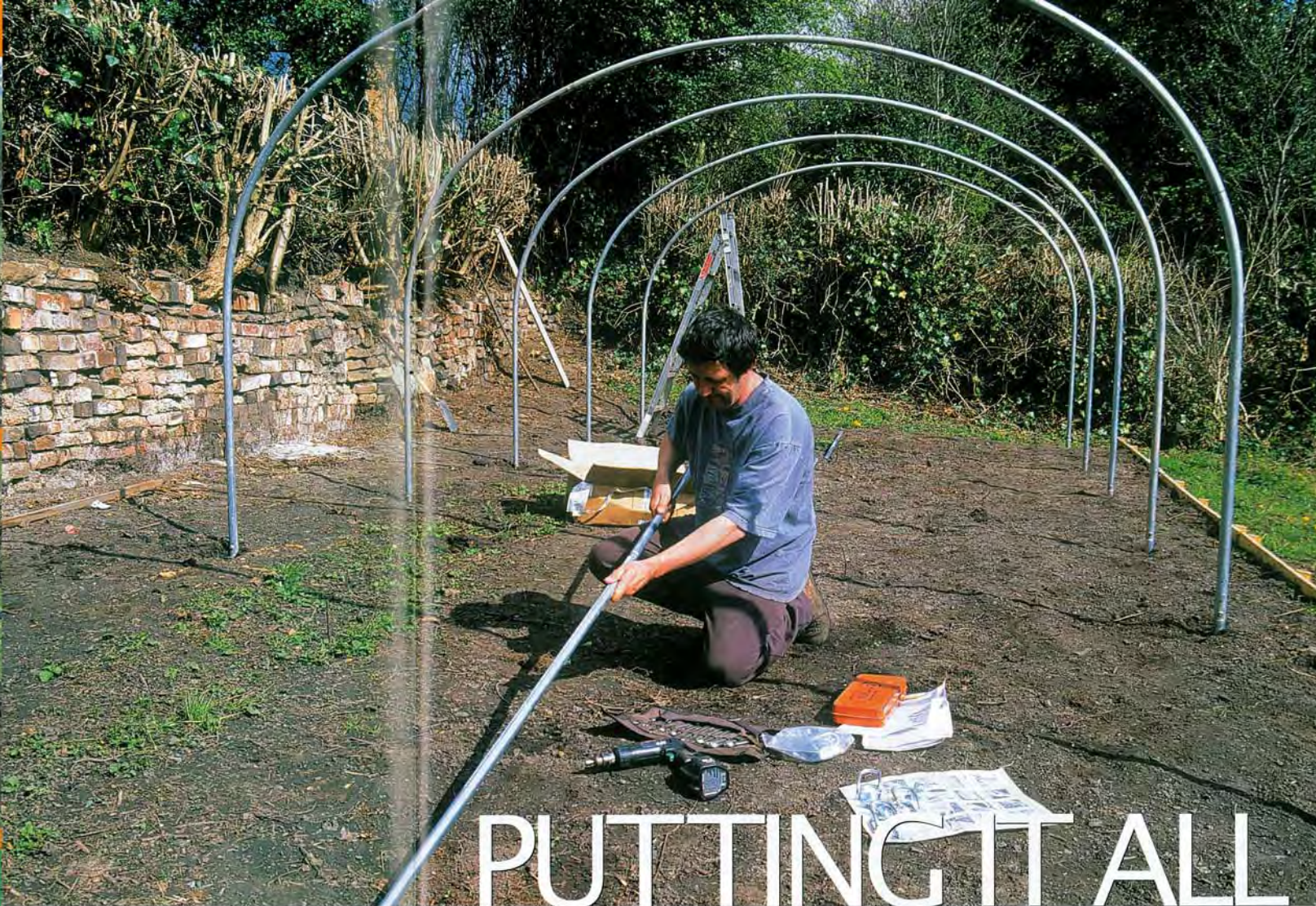
Using triangulation to check it's a true rectangle



Sinking the foundation tubes



Assembling the ridge



# PUTTING IT ALL

Hoops in position, assembling the ridge

## together



*After choosing his tunnel last month, Tom Barber gets down to the job of...*

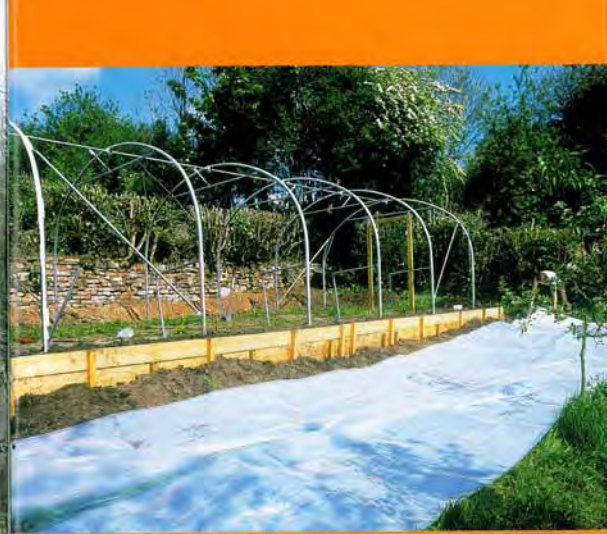
Having weighed up all the pros and cons and been convinced that a polytunnel is your next essential purchase, and after the pleasant exercise of choosing and ordering, the time will come when you will be faced with the unavoidable reality of having to put all the bits together to make the thing. Let's be up front about what is involved here (perhaps this should have formed part of your pre-purchase decision making!). My own 25ft x 12ft polytunnel

arrived, very promptly thank you, in 10 large separate packages, weighing in at more than 160kg and, according to the packing list, containing well in excess of 250 individual items (no I didn't count them all).

Make no mistake; this is emphatically not a little project to amuse you over an idle Sunday afternoon. In fact, you'll be stretched to finish over a full weekend, unless you're lucky with the weather, can work a 12-hour day without flagging, have put one up before and can call on lots of high-calibre assistance. My own polytunnel came with a free tea bag – a nice touch, but you'll need a hell of a lot more than that to sustain you while you are putting it up! The flip side is that if you can put together a piece of

flat-pack furniture, you should have no real trouble with a polytunnel. It really does not require anything beyond the most basic DIY skills and equipment. More important, I found, was dogged persistence.

You are almost bound to make the odd mistake, even relatively clear instructions are likely to leave you confused at times and there may come moments when you curse the rush of blood that led you to buy the polytunnel in the first place. Don't despair – take a break, read the instructions carefully for the fifth time, refuse to countenance defeat and be prepared for it to take longer than you thought possible. It will come together in the end, I promise.



Laying out the polythene in readiness for pulling it over the frame – note it's a calm warm day!

Inevitably there are minor differences in the detail of erecting different makes of tunnel and you are well advised to follow the instructions supplied with your tunnel pretty well to the letter. However, the basic steps are essentially the same whatever the make and can be conveniently broken down into 10 main stages.

- Mark out site
- Sink foundation tubes
- Erect hoops
- Fix ridge, bracing tubes and hot-spot tape
- Fix door frames
- Dig trench (or fix timber edges) for securing plastic
- Fit plastic
- Make up and fix doors
- Lay paths and dig beds
- Install watering

The first two steps are vital and worth spending extra time on to make sure you've got it right. Use a tape, string, pegs and 3-4-5 triangulation to mark out a true rectangle with 90-degree corners and not just any old shape. If your measurements are out much here, no amount of blood, sweat and tears is going to give you a happy-ever-after ending.



Pulling the polythene tight around the frame – one of the hardest parts of the whole job



Fixing the polythene around the door frame with battens

I followed my own advice and stuck to the instructions supplied – which for the most part were admirably detailed and well illustrated. I deviated significantly only once, when the advice was to fix and bolt the hoops together on the ground before erecting them; I found it much easier to bolt them together in situ after I had fitted them on the foundation tubes. Don't neglect to fix on hot-spot tape, which will prolong the life of your cover significantly.

We found the erection of the hooped frame itself relatively easy. The doors and door frame construction were straightforward enough – though I confess to a careless, but fortunately easily remedied mistake, building one of the doors back to front. Fixing the frames in place correctly was a little more awkward, and again I managed to fix one on back to front!

Digging the trench around the outside to bury the polythene edges was undeniably a slog. The trench specification was for a minimum of 12in wide and 16in deep, which on our allotment means the last 4in was very tough digging indeed. However, as the weight of soil back-filled over the polythene is the only thing anchoring the polytunnel down it did not seem wise to try and cut corners here.

The biggest delay, however, was waiting for a warm, still day, a willing helper and a few hours without having to attend to the children, in order to tackle the cover. When we finally got everything together the job itself was not as difficult as we had anticipated.

The backfilling is best done by one person, while the other stretches the polythene at the base of the trench with a combination of feet and hands. The only difficult part came when dealing with the two ends, when it is



Fixing anti hot-spot foam tape to the outside of the hoops

LEFT Digging the trench for the polythene

TOP The framework completed – admiring looks!

With so many stages and bits to assemble, the accuracy and clarity of the instructions is crucial, so much so it's not a bad idea before you part with your money to request a copy from the suppliers you have short-listed in order to check their quality. Make sure there are clear step-by-step instructions, both written and illustrated, covering every detail.

You'll need several fairly basic bits of equipment – spade, tape measure, pegs and string for marking out, a lump hammer and block of wood, a drill and metal bits (cordless for the allotment). Also spanners – or even better a socket set – both Phillips and flat-head screwdrivers, scissors or a Stanley knife, hammer and saw. And a step ladder will come in handy, too.

What else before you start to unwrap all those packages? Putting up a polytunnel is not a solo affair. Yes, you can do some of it working alone, but most stages are easier and quicker with a second pair of hands and indispensable when it comes to putting on the cover, when a third pair will not go amiss.

Finally, the weather. We all prefer working outdoors in warm sunshine and, when it comes to putting on the polythene, a still, windless day is virtually essential unless you want to end up wrestling (and losing) against a giant sheet of flapping plastic. Also choose a warm day as this makes the polythene more pliable, so easier to handle and stretch.

So assuming you have your site all cleared and level, it's time to begin. Although it might seem a sensible approach, do not be tempted to dig over the site before you put up the polytunnel. The foundation tubes need to be in firm (ie. un-dug) ground in order to act as efficient anchors for the hoops.



Assembling the double doors and door frame



**The tunnel in action. Timber retaining walls were necessary to level the site (see last month's Q&A)**

tricky judging the correct tension. You need enough to get the polythene as tight and crease-free as possible without damaging the plastic by over-vigorous yanking. We thought we managed OK in the end, but reckoned we could do it better second time around.

Once the tunnel itself is up it is worth thinking carefully about the internal layout. You may want staging for growing on seedlings or be looking to section off part of the tunnel for heating in order to over-winter tender plants. I did not want either, my aim instead being to maximise soil growing space, based on the same narrow no-dig beds I use in my main allotment.

I cut down some large slabs to give two narrow 1ft wide paths leaving me with a central bed of 4ft wide and two side beds of 3ft wide, so everywhere is accessible from the paths and there should be no need to walk on the soil. Watering in a polytunnel is absolutely unavoidable, so make it part of the initial construction not an after-thought: the more flexible and automated the better.

Undoubtedly the worst part of the whole job was digging the beds and adding manure, partly because the ground was so compacted and riddled with bindweed and also because I was doing it during a hot spell in June. The temperature under the plastic was up around the hundred mark, so the beds were liberally watered with sweat.

In general we were extremely satisfied with the tunnel we chose. My only complaint, and a minor one at that, is the quality of the timber used for the doors and frames. This was rough-sawn wood, similar to that used for roofing laths. Given the doors take quite a battering I would prefer to pay a little more for straighter planed, less-knotty timber. Also I have become increasingly unhappy about using pressure-treated timber (the chemicals used are extremely toxic) and I would have appreciated a non-treated option.

The crops bars I added as extras run across the tunnel at high level and have been very useful as plant supports. Were I to buy a second polytunnel I would go for timber side rail fixing for the polythene instead of trenching it. It adds a fair bit to the cost, but saves enormously on hassle and mess – and you're rewarded each time you replace the cover, which on average is every five years. Having already found out just how hot the tunnel can get, I would also be interested in looking at additional ventilation along the sides.

We originally intended the polytunnel to be up and running by the end of April at the latest and, in



**Phew – we've done it! The finished product with paths laid, beds dug and retaining boards in place**

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**A resounding thumbs up from all the family**  
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anticipation, had sown earlier in great quantity. A series of events rather than idleness (honest) conspired to delay us and the job was not finally completed until late June. By this time the old greenhouse was bulging at the seams and a sad array of increasingly pot-bound plants were condemned to wait forlornly at the polytunnel door like animals outside the Ark. Unfortunately this has meant our first few crops have been very far from perfect, but just wait – in 2006 we will hit the ground running!

Despite this I can already say it has all been worth it. Proof of the pudding is, of course, in the eating, and even with the delayed start we've had basket loads of tomatoes, peppers, chillies and cucumbers (less said about the aubergines the better), and as I write this in late October we have some sweetcorn just coming to ripeness.

A resounding thumbs up from all the family. And I look forward to the chance of updating you on how we get on in our first full year as virgin polytunnel owners. 🗑️



**The backlog of plants – like animals waiting for the Ark**

● Tom's polytunnel was supplied by **First Tunnels**, Dixon Street, Barrowford, Lancashire BB9 8PL, tel: 01282 601253 [sales@firsttunnels.co.uk](mailto:sales@firsttunnels.co.uk) [www.firsttunnels.co.uk](http://www.firsttunnels.co.uk)