The polytunnel MOT

You have had a year at the polytunnels and you probably have a list of things you need to buy or change to make your tunnel better, but every now and then it needs a little bit of TLC...

WHERE THE POLYTUNNEL is situated, how well the cover was fitted initially, whether anti-hot spot tape was used on the frame and the way it has been treated (we've all made accidental stabs with support canes and other sharp objects – or is that just me?) will all have a bearing on how long you can expect your cover to last. Modern materials have greatly improved and have a longer life expectancy than a few years ago. It's certainly not uncommon for a cover to last 6-7 years and occasionally, even as long as ten years.

Massive rips and tears across the structure and degradation of the polythene around the door frames are the most likely reason to be thinking about a replacement before the worst happens and you are caught off-guard in a howling gale with a polytunnel cover ripped to shreds and an exposed structure full of precious plants. Don't let this happen to you – timely replacement has other benefits than just not getting wet while you're outside struggling with a windswept cover in an emergency situation! You'll have plenty of time to consider whether or not you really need an exact replica of your old polythene or need a different grade. Having the luxury of time means you can shop around, perhaps discovering something new to the market.

Do you want clear polythene, white polythene, netted sides, crop bars, an irrigation system, covered flooring? New polythene is being invented every year and when your old stuff needs changing you have quite a few decisions to make.

Clear polythene is designed specifically for the UK where light is more than limited, the clear polythene allows at least 95% light transmission. Using clear polythene also scatters light entering the structure, allowing all of your plants an equal bite of the sunshine cherry.

Thermal polythene is a heat retentive anti fog film, reduces reflection and dripping condensation. Warms up faster, keeps a more even temperature and greater frost protection. It may increase the cost of the tunnel by up to 5-10%, but you can save this in heating costs. This is a good covering for northern climes.

White polythene, unlike clear polythene, white actually reduces the light transmission to about 70%. This

helps to reduce the temperature inside your polytunnel and can reduce the effects of sun-scorching on plants. This type of covering is good for southern climes, where the heat can build up alarmingly, but is also useful in any situation where the tunnel is to be used for keeping animals.

Netted sides are used around the bottom of your polytunnel, a panel of netting replaces the polythene and can act as an effective wind-break and shading when growing hardier plants and crops. It may increase the cost of the tunnel by 10-20% and there is greater ventilation inside the tunnel, unless you have a layer of polythene as well.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

When you're re-covering your tunnel, why stop at just looking at replacement polythene? If you've dreamt of getting a bigger tunnel, now's the time to add a few more hoops to make it longer. Simply adding ten feet in length would increase the space for you to grow lots more crops or simply more of the same if that's what you are aiming for. You'll need to move the brace bars and the door frame at the end you're extending, but it's a great way to improve on what you already have, and the extra hoops won't be expensive as forking out for a whole new frame. Obviously, you'll need to go back to your original supplier to ensure the hoops are the same specification as your originals. Bear in mind that a few years' wear and tear might mean your old hoops might be slightly out of line so it is worth checking them over.

Other modifications to your tunnel can also be considered now: could the ventilation be improved on? You may have soldiered on bravely over the past few years, but with the general weather pattern hotting-up in recent summers, better air circulation might be just what your polytunnel needs. A ventilation panel running along the bottom of one or both sides could be a possibility. It might be that you feel a different type of door would be better than those you already have. Ventilation panels can be incorporated into those too.

A radical change would be to clad the structure in netting and turn it into a giant fruit cage. Of course you'd lose the benefits of using it as a polytunnel, but if you have plans to buy another polytunnel as a replacement, it's a great option. Custom-made fruit cages are very expensive indeed so it could make a lot of sense to do this if you plan to grow a lot of fruit.

DOWN TO BUSINESS

You've bought your new polytunnel cover so now all you have to do is fit it.

> **YOU'VE BOUGHT YOUR NEW POLYTUNNEL COVER SO NOW ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS FIT IT**

Whether you're replacing it in good time before you really need to, or have been forced to because the old one has failed, the weather conditions will dictate the best time to do this. As always a still, dry day is best and if it's also a warm one, so much the better. Gentle heat from the sun will make the polythene slightly more pliable and easier to pull tight against the frame.

But first things first: ensure the frame is ready. All the old sheeting should be off and the trenches around the structure re-instated by digging out and removing any residual bits of the old polythene cover. The trenches should measure 12"x12" (30.5cm x 30.5cm). Ensure that all the hoops are free of any old anti-hot spot tape ▶

▶ and adhesive. If the hoops have a means of being raised or lowered on the foundation tubes, make sure these are set to the lowest hole, then you have the option of raising the hoops to re-tension the cover later on should you need to. Check that the timber doorframes are still sound because, of course they are the all-important means of securing and tightening the cover; if the wood shows any sign of weakness it needs to be replaced. Affix new anti-hot spot tape to all the parts of the frame that the polythene comes into contact.

While the cover's off, it's a good idea to thoroughly clear the soil around the frame of persistent weed growth such as couch grass, which is really difficult to pull out once the cover is in place. Believe me polythene doesn't fare well in close proximity to a gardener wielding a hoe or other sharp implement! Give yourself a fighting chance of eliminating weed growth by dealing with it before the cover goes on – it's a rare opportunity and worth making the most of.

READY, STEADY, GO

Now you really are ready to start the exciting bit. It is possible to clad a tunnel if there are just two of you (I speak from experience) but the job is easier if you have a couple of extra helpers on hand. Manoeuvring the sheeting and pulling it taut is vital and becomes much easier the more 'pulling power' you have. Unroll the polythene and lay it out along one side of the tunnel, leaving equal amounts at either end.

Repairs don't last forever!

Pull the sheet over the frame into position (some sheets have printing running along the middle which should be lined up exactly with the tunnel ridge), so that there's an equal amount on each side. Cut a vertical slit exactly in the middle of the two doorframes at either end to within 60cm of the top lintel, then trim off the surplus allowing 60cm inside the frames at either side. This will be used for pulling round the doorframes and fixing the cover in place.

Pull the polythene drum tight from one end of the tunnel to the other, pulling it around the doorframes and affixing it to them with thin wooden battens as you go. Adjustments can be made by re-tensioning the polythene on the doorframe at this stage if it is found to be too slack.

Once the polythene is fixed and tensioned to your satisfaction the surplus polythene on either side can be buried in the trenches. For extra security, we placed a few unwanted concrete posts in the trenches over the excess polythene on both our polytunnels then buried it all in the usual way. If there is an excessive amount of polythene this can be trimmed just to leave enough for easy burial. The only remaining job is to fit the doors and then look forward to many more years of happy polytunnel growing! ❊

Below: A loose untidy polytunnels will come to grief in the winter wind.