

# Keep cool & carry on

It's a busy time of year in the polytunnel, says Mark Diacono, but as always with gardening, make time for those jobs now and you'll reap the rewards.

PHOTOGRAPHY JASON INGRAM

**EARLY SUMMER** in the polytunnel can feel like a still day in Naples. Even by 7 or 8 in the morning the air can be hot, humid and a delightful contrast to our outdoor English summers. The extra warmth provides the ideal environment for many of our favourite fruit and veg to grow healthily and vigorously but to get the best of them you'll need to develop a few habits in early summer that will see you right through until harvest time.

## VENTILATION

By late May I usually have most of the Mediterranean favourites planted out in the tunnel - aubergines, cucumbers, tomatoes, chillis and sweet peppers and perhaps a few melons. They're very much at home with the early morning temperatures but by noon that blissful warmth can give way to oppressive humidity and water stress.

Keeping a handle on both is crucial. Every morning, you need to ventilate the tunnel - either by opening the doors to allow a throughflow of air, or if you have it, opening the ventilation system. This acts to regulate humidity, helps minimise the risk of disease and also allows better access for beneficial insects that help to regulate the build up of potential pests by



predation. Towards the end of the day, and crucially before the temperature sinks too low, close the ventilation and/or shut the doors, trapping valuable warmth in to help prevent the day/night temperature shift from being too extreme.

## WATERING

Watering is vital for steady growth through this maturing phase, especially in plants that are working hard to develop fruit. The Mediterranean veg likes a good steady supply and, equally importantly, it prefers not to have it from above. Use a drip system or even water by hand rather than use an overhead sprinkler for tomatoes, peppers and so on. The humidity caused by overhead watering encourages diseases that these plants are prone to, and the moisture

that collects on the leaves can lead to scorch and subsequent infection. The key is to water the ground not the plant.

## FEEDING

Whether it's the fruiting veg or you have some apricots, peaches or other fruit racing towards ripeness, a few well timed feeds in early summer can make a huge difference. High potassium feed, either tomato feed, seaweed feed or homemade comfrey tea, will give the plant and it's development of fruit a boost - a weekly feed watered in, and/or misted on to the leaves of tree fruit helps keep the plant healthy and promote good fruiting.

## HARVESTING

It's not all hard work in early summer - as well as the continued harvesting of cut and come again leaves and the continuation of sowing (left), the first apricots, nectarines and peaches should all be approaching ripeness. This is as good as homegrown food gets. Please be patient - you've waited this long, don't ruin things as you approach the finishing line. Put your hands away and let your nose guide you. If the fruit smells full, deep and aromatic you are almost there. Don't prod it - the fruit can bruise and even lead to pests such as wasps taking advantage of the soft indentation. In a perfect world, you'd catch (rather than pick) the fruit. If you think it's time, grip the fruit lightly in the palm of your hand - don't squeeze - and gently twist. Don't be upset if it doesn't leave the plant easily, leave it there, it will only get better with time. When it finally drops you'll be in for one of the tasty treats of your life.

Cut and come again lettuce is perfect for polytunnels - just make sure you ventilate on hot days



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## POLYTUNNELS

**1** **Ventilation will help keep pests and diseases** in check by allowing air and predating insects in but the odd nuisance is inevitable. Keep a watchful eye, act early and be ready to order biological controls - such as the predatory wasp aphidius for controlling aphids, or the predatory mite *Phytoseiulus persimilis* for eradicating red spider mite - where necessary.

**2** **Be aware of specific requirements that any of your polytunnel plants might have** - stringing some shade netting between canes or hung from the bars can prevent potential scorching of sensitive plants; likewise, a mini-polytunnel or cloche within the polytunnel will intensify conditions if you're trying something more exotic like bananas.

**3** **It can be a busy time in the polytunnel but** do find a moment to make any repairs should you damage the cover - holes can expand with the slightest pressure and valuable heat is lost through tears, especially at night. Keep some specialist tape and some polytunnel plastic (see [www.firsttunnels.co.uk](http://www.firsttunnels.co.uk)) to hand and repair where needed immediately. Garden canes are the main culprit when it comes to polytunnel damage so work with these with care.

**4** **Remember, many of your plants will be putting on strong growth** and/or developing heavy crops: give them some support. Tie tomatoes, chillis and peppers to canes or string hanging from the bars - the same for melons and cucumbers, if you aren't letting them scramble.

**5** **Lastly, if you have any salad leaves growing in the polytunnel** at this time of year, keep cutting them - even if you can't eat them. If you leave them they'll bolt and become tough and bitter in a flash so keep cutting, passing on any you can't eat to friends.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT Water in the mornings by hand; twist peaches to harvest them - don't pull; aubergines will need support; tomatoes are gently tied in with garden twine - but not too tight so to damage stems



PEACHES, AUBERGINE AND TYING IN TOMATOES/MARK DIACONO