

THIS MONTH

- POLYTUNNELS
- WHAT TO GROW

In association with
First Tunnels
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Veg answers



A polytunnel will boost your crops

If you have room, a polytunnel will transform the way you grow crops and extend the season of productivity. Suddenly tomatoes and peppers will be joined by melons and aubergines and you will be picking salads and exciting vegetables almost all year.

Polytunnels are sometimes regarded as nothing more than a cheap greenhouse but they are a useful garden addition in their own right. It is a curious fact that some plants seem to grow better under plastic than under glass and the atmosphere is very different. In general it is more humid and, unless you buy one with vents, it can be hot in summer and is always cold in winter.

Before buying, there are some important considerations. First, it is sensible to buy as large a polytunnel as you can afford and accommodate – you will always find plenty to grow in it. This applies to width as well as length. You will have at least one door – preferably one at each end, so you get some ventilation – and you will need a path through the centre which will take up about 45cm (18in) minimum width. So a wider polytunnel will be more efficient. Consider the side curves – those with straighter, more upright sides will be easier to work in without stooping and you will be able to

grow taller plants right up to the edge.

The most annoying thing about polytunnels is having to re-skin them. Even UV stabilised polythene skins deteriorate over time and get brittle, less transparent or ripped. So always buy the best quality you can when ordering – thin, cheap polythene is a bad investment.

There are two main ways to hold the skin in place. The simplest is to dig a trench around the frame and tuck the edge of the polythene in that, cover with soil and trim the sheet. This can hold the skin tight but you must allow room around the structure, not only to do this, but to dig it out and replace the polythene every three years or so. The other way is to fit a wooden frame around the base, just above soil level and attach the skin with battens. It looks neater and may be easier to reskin – at least it will be less messy. My current tunnel from First Tunnels has its skin fixed in this way.

There are two main ways the frame is held in place. Mine has brackets that are

screwed into place in holes that were dug and then refilled, making a very secure base. The more traditional way is to 'bang' tubes in the ground and slide the tunnel frame into these sleeves – the polythene cover holds the whole structure down when it is buried around the edge.

Ideally, the tunnel should be erected and skinned on a warm day, not only so you can handle the metal parts with more comfort but also because the polythene cover will be more 'stretchy' and easier to tension, but this is not essential and my latest went up on a chilly November day two years ago! But try not to pick a windy day – 15m (50ft) of polythene flapping in the breeze is not as much fun as it sounds.

You will need some form of irrigation in the polytunnel and a sprinkler system or seep hoses will certainly make life easier. Then you should improve the soil, as with any veg growing, adding as much organic matter as possible. After all that, you can get growing.



Enjoy salads almost all year round



Pull tasty radishes in April

WHAT TO GROW

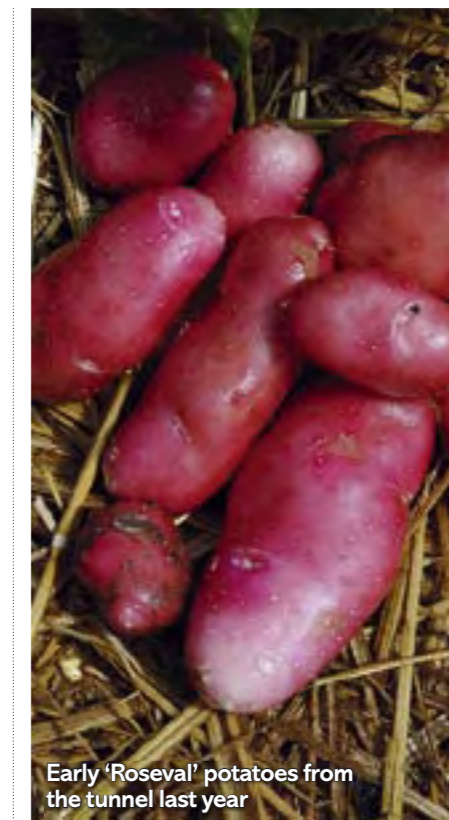
The list of crops you can grow in your polytunnel is extensive. Most usefully you can extend the season significantly so early crops of salads are possible and you can sow winter salads like winter lettuce and lamb's lettuce. Endives and chicories can be harvested well into winter and oriental veg will flourish into autumn too. I always grow a few early potatoes too – mainly salad potatoes – but the main benefit is the extra warmth in summer that allows tomatoes, aubergines, peppers and cape gooseberries to thrive.

Last year the advantage of growing tomatoes in the polytunnel was clear because they did not succumb to blight as plants outside did. In fact, I have to confess that growing tomatoes was the main reason why I put up the polytunnel in the first place. I grow a wide variety of types and they all thrive under plastic. By choosing some small, baby plum types such as 'Santa' I was able to pick my first ripe tomatoes in early July. I tend to favour the large beefsteak kinds and these are much more reliable in here than outside. Because you will have soil rather than paving (I spread straw around liberally for the path and to mulch, despite the way it attracts slugs) you can easily plant between the tomatoes or allow wider spacing for bush tomatoes that sprawl along the ground. But by keeping the plants dry and avoiding rain splash, the fruits of these low-growers will be kept clean. I sow rows

of French beans and plant the tomatoes between these and they crop before the tomatoes get too big. Melons, cucumbers and watermelons also produce good crops and any spare gaps I fill with salad leaves, herbs and radishes throughout the summer.

The latest addition in my own tunnel has been a peach and a nectarine. I have grown these before in a tunnel and they have done brilliantly. The advantage of growing them in a polytunnel is that you can keep the foliage dry, which will usually prevent any problems with peach leaf curl, the most serious disease of these two crops and the polytunnel will protect the flowers from frost in most cases. However, you will need to hand-pollinate the flowers because early bees may not be able to find them. The other advantage is that, even in wet summer, you can be sure your fruits will ripen and you can try almost any variety you want, not just the early varieties that may seem the sensible option in your area.

If you have room, or the inclination, you could easily produce an early crop of strawberries or a late crop of perpetual strawberries and there is even the possibility of growing



Early 'Roseval' potatoes from the tunnel last year

autumn-fruiting raspberries too, either in a cold area where they may not normally thrive or simply to extend the season.

A polytunnel really is worth every penny if you grow your own veg. 🍅



It is vital to get the frame measured out accurately



You will need a hand to put the cover on

ERECTING MY 30FT POLYTUNNEL ON THE ALLOTMENT



Straw bales made handy steps and were later used as mulch



By the end of a long day, the polytunnel was complete