

To have created a veggie garden from scratch and delivered a range of tasty vegetables, fruit and salad to the family table in less than a year has left me feeling quite chuffed (see GA Dec, Jan and Feb issues). However it has also made me hungry for more this season, so my thoughts have turned to the possibility of investing in a greenhouse or polytunnel. Not only do I like the idea of enjoying an extended home-produced range over a longer season, but I find the prospect of having a sheltered 'indoor-outdoor' area to potter in very appealing. It might also stop my husband and me arguing over the rights to our shed.

I also can't help thinking that an undercover growing area would open up some exciting possibilities with my other garden passion – my 'jungle'. Perhaps I could propagate my own plants and bring on some of the beautiful leafy giants earlier so I could enjoy their full glory for longer. It may also give me another option for overwintering some plants and take some of the pressure off my spare room!

However, the question is, would a polytunnel or greenhouse suit my purposes and pocket better?

A measured approach

The area I have in mind is sited next to my vegetable garden. It is reasonably flat, with a slight fall across the width, so would not require much preparation, other than getting the ground ready for planting as it is currently turf.

I would need to allow generous access on all four sides for construction and maintenance, and for trimming the hedge that runs along one long side. In addition I would not want to encroach on the vegetable beds too much, to avoid

problems with shadows or water run off. All in all, the optimum size, budget permitting, would be between 3m x 3.6m (10ft x 12ft) and 3.5m x 5.5m (12ft x 18ft).

All the advice I have received recommends going as big as you can manage for a variety of reasons. Firstly, a wider building gives more room for an access path and in the case of a polytunnel reduces the pressure to grow right to the edges where the sloping sides can be restrictive. Secondly, temperature regulation is easier in larger structures, with less dramatic extremes. Finally, by all accounts, growing undercover tends to be addictive and the tendency is to always want more space.

The structure would need to run north east to south west and it would get most sun early on in the morning, perfect for warming up quickly after the chill of the night. However, mature trees may prevent much sun reaching it from lunchtime onwards – possibly a good thing on summer days. There are no trees directly over the potential spot which would reduce light or even inflict damage through falling branches.

Water is also readily to hand. While a greenhouse can be used to collect water into a butt, a polytunnel is trickier.

Finally, a key requirement is that my children can not only enjoy the garden around the structure safely, but be able and encouraged to be involved in the planting and growing itself, so it needs to be robust and safe.

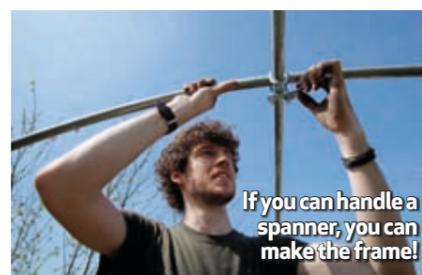
Turn over for my decision chart in the polytunnel vs greenhouse debate. Thanks to First Tunnels and The Incredibly Sensible Greenhouse Company for all their help and advice.



Most tender plants thrive in a polytunnel



Fitting the cover is simple but can't be rushed



If you can handle a spanner, you can make the frame!



A polytunnel gives you a lot of space for your money



You will need a firm base to begin with



Wooden frames enhance a garden



A greenhouse can be beautiful in summer



Lean-to greenhouses save space and cost less to heat



For many gardeners, a greenhouse is not just somewhere to grow plants – it is a status symbol. And size matters!

ON THE LEVEL

If you are not sure your site is level, don't be tempted to guess or judge things by eye as looks can be deceiving.

Arm yourself with some sturdy wooden stakes (up to one foot long depending on the slope of your land), a mallet and a long spirit level. Roughly where a corner of your structure would go, bang a peg into the ground so it is secure but still sticking out of the ground. Then, bang in another peg part way, on the line that would be where the side of your structure would run – however, keep it close enough to the first peg that the spirit level can be put across the tops of both pegs. Now using your spirit level, adjust the pegs until the tops are level. With the spirit level still on the pegs, take a look at how much your ground varies compared to the level.

Add further pegs and level them to each other so you can check the fall in all directions. To save time and cover bigger areas, find a long straight piece of wood that can be placed across more distant pegs and levelled.



The veg beds complete, Justine can increase the range of crops with a covered growing area

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WHICH IS BEST? THE FACTS

	GREENHOUSE	POLYTUNNEL
Site preparation	Must be put up on a firm, level site.	A slight slope can be accommodated and even helpful in heavy soils. Slopes can be dealt with using extended foundation tubes.
Base	Can either be bolted onto a hard slab or onto anchor points sunk into the ground.	Can either be bolted to hard surfaces or anchored into soft ground. Polythene may be secured by burying it in a trench dug around the tunnel perimeter, or by battening to a base rail fixed to the frame.
Position	Optimum east to west. Aim for direct sun for two-thirds of the day, ideally in the morning. Door to face away from prevailing wind. Natural shade is beneficial in summer.	Optimum north to south as this generally offers slightly lower temperatures, better for the plants and polythene. Long side to face prevailing wind.
Construction ease / time	60% of people buying a greenhouse opt to have it installed. Average (2.4m x 3m) 8ft x 10ft may take a weekend to construct, or one day for an experienced fitter.	95% of people buying a polytunnel opt to erect it themselves. Average polytunnel will take a couple of days to construct. Choose a still, warm day - the polythene will be much more flexible and manageable.
Planning permission	Generally there is no need for planning permission. However, if in doubt check with your Local Authority.	Generally for a domestic polytunnel there is no need for planning permission, but if in doubt check with your Local Authority.
Cover / glass options	Horticultural glass, toughened glass or polycarbonate. Toughened glass much safer as if it breaks it falls into blunt cubes. Approx 20% more expensive than normal glass. Polycarbonate offers best insulation but has limited lifespan and is prone to blowing out of frame.	Standard polythene, thermal anti-fog or white polythene. First is the cheapest and the last is used primarily for plants which prefer reduced light. Thermal anti-fog is designed to reduce running condensation which can damage plants and improve heat retention.
Lifespan	A well-made greenhouse that is properly maintained should last 30 years plus. With bigger greenhouses, it is particular important to go for better quality to ensure strength and safety.	For optimum lifespan a polytunnel must be constructed with the polythene as taut as possible. Using anti-hot spot tape can add a year to the life of a tunnel. Most need replacement covers after five years - these cost 15-20% of original tunnel price.
Maintenance	Replace glass clips promptly to avoid wind damage. Glass can be replaced as needed. Door and vents mechanisms can be flimsy, especially if they are cheaper.	Always have specific polytunnel repair tape to hand to patch any damage promptly and prevent spread. Be aware that animals, bonfires and falling branches all present potential hazards.
Ventilation	Cheaper greenhouses tend to offer limited ventilation, usually just through roof openings. Those offering lower level side vents will maximise air changes.	For up to 3.6m (12ft) long tunnels, a door at either end will provide adequate ventilation. For longer tunnels net vents can be added to the side panels.
Heating	Fan-assisted electric heaters are best for plants but can be expensive to run, depending on the temperature. Gas heaters create moisture which can lead to problems in winter. Fitting bubble wrap aids insulation.	Tunnels can be heated but buy a heater suitable for your length of tunnel. Bubble wrap can be added to improve insulation but is tricky to install.
Shading	Necessary in summer. Glass paint is effective but unsightly, or fix net to the outside of the greenhouse.	The opacity of polythene tends to provide shading but shade netting can also be used if necessary.
Extras	Automatic vent openers are useful. You will also need staging, and a potting bench is useful too.	Irrigation, crop bars, ground cover mats, and freestanding or fixed staging are all available for polytunnels.
Costs	With toughened glass: 2.4m x 3m (8ft x 10ft) from £690 3m x 3.6m (10ft x 12ft) from £1,200 3.6m x 5.4m (12ft x 18ft) from £3,000	With thermal anti-fog polythene, anchor plates and base rails: 2.4m x 3m (8ft x 10ft) from £379 3m x 3.6m (10ft x 12ft) from £437 3.6m x 6m (12ft x 20ft) from £588
Cost per sq ft growing space	2.4m x 3m (8ft x 10ft) = £8.63 per sq ft 3m x 3.6m (10ft x 12ft) = £10 per sq ft 3.6m x 5.4m (12ft x 18ft) = £13.89 per sq ft	2.4m x 3m (8ft x 10ft) = £4.74 per sq ft 3m x 3.6m (10ft x 12ft) = £3.64 per sq ft 3.6m x 6m (12ft x 20ft) = £2.45 per sq ft
Pros at a glance	Looks good Long life Automatic ventilation possible Water collection easy	Cheaper The bigger you go, the cheaper it gets. Suitable even for sloping sites Straight forward to construct
Cons at a glance	Site must be level Get less growing space for your money More expensive Too much direct sun can cause problems	Short life span Prone to damage Water collection trickier Ventilation less refined

JUSTINE'S CONCLUSION - A POLYTUNNEL

If appearance was a consideration, a greenhouse would be top of my list but I want a practical growing space and it will be hidden from view from most parts of the garden. I will not be heating it and I am tempted by the fact that a polytunnel is quicker and easier to construct. I also need the maximum bang for my buck so I think, for my needs and budget, a polytunnel is likely to suit me best.