Laying out your POLYTUNNEL

Andy McKee and Mark Gatter emphasise the importance of laying your polytunnel out for ease of use, with low maintenance in mind so you can concentrate on growing

ONCE YOUR POLYTUNNEL frame is up and you're waiting for warmer days to put the cover on, it's time to figure out where the beds are going to be. It would be lovely to wait until the cover was on, because then it would be so much easier to visualise things, and you could save the work for rainy days: but digging is much easier *before* the cover goes onto your polytunnel because you don't have to worry about where your spade is going, and it's easier to get in and out with a wheelbarrow too. So get on with it!

ESTABLISHING THE LAYOUT

Path layouts for a polytunnel are largely determined by its width. For kneeling and wheelbarrow use, a path should ideally be 60cm (2ft) wide. Beds, on the other hand, should be no deeper than you can comfortably reach from the path. This usually means 60cm (2ft) if you can only access one side of the bed, but remember to add 15cm (6in) of slack at the sides of the tunnel, even in straight-sided models, so that you don't have to garden right up to the plastic.

Beds with paths on each side can be 1.2m (4ft) deep before you struggle to reach the middle: any deeper, and you will have to use stepping-stones or a temporary board to stand on. Of course you could make the bed deeper and put plants that don't need frequent visits in the hard to reach areas, such as very dwarfing fruit trees or herbs, but don't forget to factor in their shade when you think about what will go around them. Shade is less profound in a polytunnel because most covers diffuse the light, but it's a bad idea to ignore it completely.

RAISED BEDS OR FLAT?

Raised beds are definitely in vogue at the moment, but they're not suitable for every situation. In a polytunnel the edging boards help keep your path material from leaking into the beds, can help stop small children from accidentally treading where they shouldn't, and don't need to be double-dug to start them off. On the other hand they do dry out faster than flat beds – no joke if you're working on light soil – and of course you have to get hold of edging boards and serious amounts of topsoil or commercial compost, unless you're lucky enough to have it to hand. ▶

MAKING THE BEDS

▶ If you decide to go for regular beds, 'all' you have to do is double-dig where you want them to be, incorporating lots of organic matter as you go (there's a splendidly confusing animation of how to double-dig on Wikipedia, and rather better instructions on the RHS website). It's a lot of work, but provided you feed your new beds by top-dressing them with a balanced organic fertiliser and a few centimetres of compost once a year and keep them well watered, you'll never have to do it again.

If you're going down the raised beds route, the first thing to do is get hold of edging boards and some sturdy 46cm (18in) stakes to hold them in place. Old scaffolding boards make good edging, as they're fairly thick and haven't usually been treated: just ring round some local scaffolders and see what they have available. If you're lucky you might even get them for free!

Cut the edging boards to size, and then it's time to single-dig the bed areas. If, on the other hand, you're working on an old lawn rather than a lovely, crumbly vegetable garden, then just cut the turf into squares to a spade's depth and turn them upside down. There's no real need to do more: you'll be topping the raised bed up with a spade's depth of fresh material, and the worms will do the rest (lucky you!). But first, the paths.

MAKING PATHS

Paths in polytunnels should always be low maintenance, and that usually means using a weedproof membrane topped with a few centimetres of something that will exclude light. Polytunnel paths are the very definition of 'heavy use', so buy good, heavy-duty membrane or you will find yourself

Above: Don't forget to leave room for staging.

Right: Scalpings cost about a quarter of the price of gravel.

Above: Stakes and boards – no fixing required.

Below: For flat beds, slot the edge of the membrane into a shallow trench and backfill it.

redoing the job in no time. Spend a little time removing stones and other hard objects from the soil before you spread the membrane out, as these are the places where it will wear through first.

If you're making raised beds, then the membrane runs under the edging boards by a few centimetres. You can tuck it under the dug-over soil (as shown in the photo) or just leave it flat; either way, this overlap is crucial to reduce the chance of any renegade couch grass (god forbid!) escaping from the path to the bed, or the other way around. Once the membrane is down, hammer in the supporting stakes and slot the sides into place. Make sure you put enough stakes in place to stop the boards bowing out with the weight of soil.

If you're making regular flat beds, then you can either tuck the edges of the path membrane down into the soil in exactly the same way, or you can put in some shallow boards to edge the path anyway, sunk almost to soil level with the membrane tucked down the side. This helps to stop the material used to dress the path from wandering into the beds, and also provides a handy visual marker for the edge of the bed – not always easy to see as the years go by!

DRESSING THE PATHS

If you're using overhead irrigation, then your path dressing has to be something that won't rot down, such as gravel or quarry waste known as scalpings, which is much cheaper. If not, then you can use bark chunks or even sawdust. After a few years of this, the soil on the paths may become so dried out and compacted that you can strip off the substrate and membrane all together, but if you have bare paths you'll find that there are always a few weed seeds arriving from outside, courtesy of birds and the wind. Having an obsessive nature helps!

At last it's time to top up those raised beds with topsoil, compost, or a mixture of the two. Don't fill them quite up to the top of the boards or you'll find you're forever clearing spilt compost off the paths. Anyway, you'll be surprised at just how much material it takes to fill them! ▶

UNWELCOME VISITORS

▶ Finally, on to some critters who'd like nothing better than to visit your tunnel for nefarious purposes, eager to wreak havoc on your lovely new beds.

It doesn't take cats long to take stock of the many benefits of polytunnels, especially when it's cold and wet outside. You may not mind a small corner of rocket being flattened down for a bed, but chances are you draw the line at newly raked soil being used as a litter tray – I know I do! You can keep cats at bay by using a mulch of chopped holly leaves around the outside of the tunnel, but don't forget it's there and approach in bare feet! The amount of damage cats do, however, is small beer compared to rabbits. These are a particular terror for polytunnel gardeners, as once they learn of the succulent delights inside they'll come back for more day after day.

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The second group of interlopers are the little furry beggars: mice and voles. Mice are relatively easy to deal with, being suckers for a bit of peanut butter and a regular humane trap. Voles are much trickier to catch alive; to relocate them you need to use a specialist piece of kit called a Longworth vole trap, and check it at least twice a day.

Once you get your tunnel free of cats, dogs, rabbits, voles, Old Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and all, there's a simple solution that seems to keep them all out pretty well. We call it the Bunnygate. Knocked up out of some offcuts of wood and set against a board tacked across the bottom of the frame, the Bunnygate is easy for humans to negotiate but has – so far – resisted all incursions by furry friends of all varieties. The weighted mesh at the top, by the way, is to keep out butterflies: much easier and more effective than trying to protect the actual plants. ❋

Below: The Bunnygate. You can look, Peter Rabbit, but you can't touch.

Further Info

Visit Andy and Mark at: http://www.farminmypocket.co.uk for info on self-sufficiency.

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