HEAT, VENTILATION AND WATERING

Mark Gatter and Andy McKee are looking to balance heat, ventilation and watering with summer sun to enhance growing conditions in the polytunnel, and Mark provides a solution for any cucumber and courgette gluts

'HEAT', 'VENTILATION', 'WATERING' – these are three key words at this time of year. Assuming we get some sunshine – and my fingers are tightly crossed – the temperature in a polytunnel will rocket in no time. Unless there's adequate ventilation and water for your plants, you could lose the lot.

Polytunnel crops demand much more water than vegetables in outside beds simply because under cover it's a hotter, drier environment. So, if you didn't put in an automatic watering system, why ever not? It could now be saving you many hours of work every week. Instead of standing there with a hose (or watering can, if you are struggling with a hosepipe ban) you could be lying back in your polytunnel hammock, dreaming of… well, somebody else doing the watering, for a start!

Incidentally: to all hosepipe ban victims (if there are still any bans remaining after the recent deluges), there's no need to lose heart; and even more important – no need to lose your valuable vegetable crops. A soaker hose (like a hosepipe but porous along its length, so water leaks out) is considered 'smart watering' and is still perfectly OK to use, even during a hosepipe ban. Solid plastic pipes (also allowed) should be used ▶

▶ to get the water source close to or inside the polytunnel, and then all you need to do is hook up a pressure regulator and a soaker hose or two. Watering is taken care of automatically and so long as you also have a pressure regulator as well, it's completely legal. Now, go and buy a hammock.

July is an amazing month for crops, as everything seems to be ready at once! The first tomatoes, the first peppers, the first courgettes, squash, sweetcorn, aubergines – in fact everything you've been waiting for since the summer of 2011. Of course, if you've been really clever about it you might have had your first tomatoes (etc!) in June, but if not you can safely bet on having them now.

And you might also have your first beans – both bush and climbing varieties – if you're lucky. While beans generally do well outside the polytunnel, if you're isolating runner bean varieties for seed, or just want an early start on the crop, you may plant them under cover as well. However, beware the grey mould. Beans are delicate and shed leaves and flowers, and these are prone to mould. Spend a few minutes each day cleaning up the patch or you'll probably be sorry.

Bush beans need more space than you might think. If they're too close to each other, then, aside from dropped flowers and leaves, the sheer lack of ventilation will quickly cause grey mould to appear, and once there it spreads fast.

Bush beans.

Cut away any affected areas and remove them as soon as you can. If the plants are becoming 'leggy' through being overcrowded, cut a few off at ground level (pulling them up might easily damage surrounding plants) to create some space. The others will be healthier for it, and you'll get a better crop.

Mould is also a problem with climbing varieties. When growing beans under cover, rather than growing them in a 'teepee' – where they all tend to bunch together at the top – train them to grow away from each other, as the mass of vegetation is a perfect environment for mould. By contrast, outside there will be plenty of natural ventilation, and even in a teepee arrangement there will probably be no mould at all.

> ASSUMING WE GET SOME SUNSHINE – AND MY FINGERS ARE TIGHTLY CROSSED – THE TEMPERATURE IN A POLYTUNNEL WILL ROCKET IN NO TIME

'Cherokee Trail of Tears' beans.

If you can get them, grow a few 'Cherokee Trail of Tears' beans. If you don't have them they can be purchased from Real Seeds (www.realseeds.co.uk/beans.html) for next year. Possibly the best climbing bean of all, they were the staple diet of the Cherokee native Americans, who rated them so highly that they were one of the few possessions taken with them on their notorious 'trail of tears' walk, when forcibly relocated by the US government.

Not only a delicious green bean, when dried these are a great soup and stew bean as well, and they're incredibly prolific. A small row will give you all the fresh beans you could ask for, with plenty for storage and next year's crop as well. Andy and I (www.farminmypocket.co.uk) included them in our 'Free Seeds' giveaway earlier this year. We're hoping to give more seed varieties away for free next spring, so keep checking the website to see what's available.

VEG OF THE MONTH: CUCUMBER

Last year I kept coming back to the house carrying buckets full of beautiful cucumbers. Eventually, my wife suggested that we should not grow quite so many this year. "But we only have one plant", I said. In the end we must have had over eighty cucumbers from a single plant and, as our neighbours began to hide when they saw me coming with yet another cuke, we decided to pickle them. If you have a cucumber glut, or a courgette glut, you may want to consider trying the following recipe. It's easy, quick, and you'll have some of the best pickles you ever tasted as a result.

If they're fresh off the vine, cucumbers and courgettes don't need to be small – they can be fully grown. These pickles are known as 'bread and butter pickles' in the US and are made in a hot-water bath rather than in a pressure canner, as it's an acidic mix. We use 'canning' jars with a two-piece lid.

Cukes – washed and ready.

Cucumber Pickle

INGREDIENTS

MAKES 9 x 0.75 LITRE JARS
12 cucumbers (or courgettes)
8 red onions – yellow can be used, but red onions are sweeter. (This fills three large saucepans leaving enough room for the ice on the top)
8 trays of ice cubes or a similar amount of crushed ice
1½ cups of pickling salt or sea salt

FOR THE SYRUP
1.5 litres (2½ pints) of cider vinegar ('regular' vinegar can be used)
4 cups sugar
5 tbsp yellow/black mustard seeds
3 tbsp turmeric

OPTIONAL EXTRAS
4 tbsp celery seeds
Garlic
Chilli flakes

METHOD

FOR THE VEGETABLES

1 Wash the vegetables, cut off their ends and slice them crosswise into 4mm (⅛in) slices, then slice the onions thinly. ▶

2 ▶ Mix the vegetables and onions in a large saucepan, sprinkling the salt over them as you do so.
3 Fill bowls or saucepans with the mixture, leaving enough room for a layer of ice at the top, then cover and place in the fridge. The mix should sit for no less than four hours, but can be left overnight. Just prior to being added to the syrup it should be drained and rinsed a couple of times with cold water.

FOR THE HOT-WATER BATH
4 Prepare the hot-water bath. The water should eventually be high enough to be at least 2.5cm (1in) above the filled jars. It's a good idea to get this going right at the start, as water takes a lot of heating. If you leave it until after preparing the syrup, the pickles will have time to cool right down again and may become soft.

FOR THE SYRUP
5 Combine the ingredients and bring to a boil.
6 Add the drained marinade mix to the syrup and bring it back to almost a boil.

TO PREPARE THE JARS
7 Wash your jars with very hot water, then rinse them thoroughly, making sure there's no soap left in them at all. Leave them filled with clean, hot water until required.
8 Put the lids in a saucepan of boiling water, then turn the heat off, but keep a lid on the saucepan to keep everything hot. Lids should not be reused and should be fresh each time you make pickles.
9 Check the screw caps. If they have any dents in the top edge, don't use them, as they won't apply an even pressure all around the rim of the jars, making them unlikely to seal properly.

TO FILL THE JARS
10 With a slotted spoon, loosely pack the jars, then ladle the syrup into them until they are filled to the bottom of the neck. Give them a bit of gentle agitation so that the contents settle, and use a chopstick or wooden spoon to help release any trapped air pockets.
11 Wipe around the rims of the jars with a clean, damp cloth.
12 Using tongs, lift the lids out of the hot water and place them on the jars, but don't touch the underside of them in the process. Adjust the screw rings so that they're firm, but do not overtighten them. This allows expanding air to escape during the heating process.
13 Place the filled jars in the hot-water bath using the jar tongs, and add more hot water as needed so that it's 2cm (1¾in) above the jars. Bring the temperature to 82–85°C (180–185°F) and hold it there for 30 minutes. Leave a cooking thermometer submerged in the water so that you have a constant readout of the temperature.
14 After 30 minutes, carefully lift the jars out of the water using the tongs. Set them to one side to cool. Within a couple of minutes you should hear a distinctive 'click' as the cooling mixture contracts slightly and creates a slight vacuum beneath the lids. That's known as 'sealing'.

When sealed, the contents of the jars should keep for several months. When opened, keep in the fridge and use within a few days.

✻ If one jar doesn't seal properly and you have another batch to process, it can be put back in the water for a second attempt: First, unscrew the ring and check to see if there is any obvious reason for it not sealing – for instance, a bit of onion stuck between the jar and the lid. However, if after that it still doesn't seal it's probably best to put it in the fridge (when cool!) to use first. ✻

Further Info

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

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