Picture Credit: Mark Gatter©

AUGUST UNDER PLASTIC

Andy McKee and Mark Gatter are beginning to wind down as the end of the season approaches, but complacency now could mean an empty tunnel in winter and a very hungry 'hungry gap'

THE CLOSE OF August sees the beginning of a gradual end for the polytunnel summer, and your tunnel should now be groaning with summer goodies. If this has been your first year of tunnel growing, you're probably feeling justifiably proud of yourself just now. Not only did you learn how to put a polytunnel up and lay the beds out, but you also learned how to balance background and top watering. Hopefully, you mastered how to maintain good airflow and ventilation too. You may have also cracked how to control slugs, snails and other nasties without dousing your tunnel in chemicals, and how to keep your soil in good condition. And that's before we even get on to the plants… no wonder you're tired!

'Antalya' F1 melon supported with a mesh sling.

But August is no time to rest on your laurels, even though the outdoor garden will be keeping you fairly busy. Weatherwise it's a bit duller and more humid than July, and even though it's still warm the gradually shortening days spell the beginning of the end for the growing season. That's true in the polytunnel too, but it takes a lot longer to happen. Regardless, it's all downhill from here to Christmas. Cheery soul, aren't I?

There's a serious point here. Back in Issue 51 (June) I mentioned that even though everything was green and lovely, it was time to start ▶

▶ thinking about planning for the hungry gap. Hopefully, by now, you have some idea of what you'd like your tunnel to look like next March, because if you don't start working towards that now, things are going to look pretty empty come next spring. The shortening days mean that the longer you leave sowing, the more new seedlings will struggle to establish themselves in time for winter. So start now, and plan to put your last seeds in by the first week of September (in the north) or the last week (in the south).

'Marconi Red' peppers ripening on a suspended shelf in the polytunnel.

THE BLACK ARTS (AKA SOWING FOR THE HUNGRY GAP)

Here in the UK most of us aren't really used to growing a lot of stuff over winter. Hardy brassicas and leeks, yes; tender beetroot and lettuce, not so much. Working out how to have them ready to harvest during the winter, or ready to grow away for the hungry gap, can be tricky too. Tunnel installations are very individual and there's a fair bit of trial and error involved, but there are a few tricks you can use to stack the odds in your favour.

✻ MAKE A PLAN
Draw a sketch of how you want your tunnel to look during next year's hungry gap, bearing in mind what's growing where now. Work back from the plan to work out what you need to sow now, and where. It may mean taking a few plants out earlier than you'd like, but think how smug you'll be in the spring!

✻ USE MODULES
If the ground's not free for your overwintering turnips yet, start them off in 8cm (3in) modules and move them when you can.

✻ UNDERSOW
Tiny seeds like carrots will still germinate if you plant them under a taller plant, like a tomato. They may not make much growth to start off with, but if you snip the tomato plant off at ground level rather than pulling it up you won't disturb them and they'll soon make the best of what light there is left.

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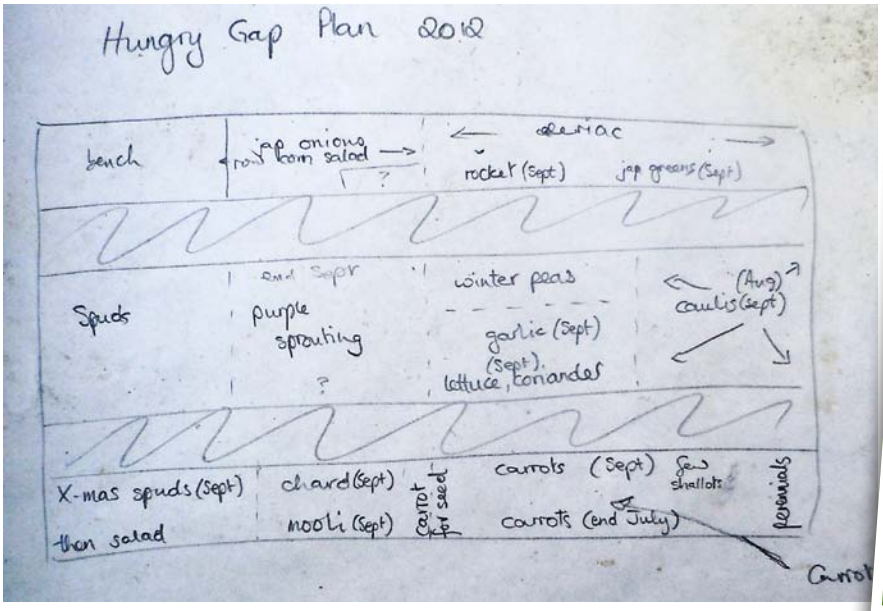
✻ GO ALTERNATIVE
Don't limit yourself to the same old veg and the same old varieties:



A quick-and-dirty (literally) paper plan for the hungry gap.

take a look at some of the fantastic varieties that heritage seed suppliers such as Realseeds and HSL have to offer. Ask them for advice – they're usually more than happy to help.

MAKE SMALLER SOWINGS EVERY TWO OR THREE WEEKS
Having a spread of plant ages makes it less likely that an early winter or an Indian summer will throw all your plans into disarray. And above all…

Winter brassica seedlings in modules. © Mark Gatter.

Wild Rocket

Rocket is more valuable in the winter and during the hungry gap than it is at this time of the year, but now's the time to sow it to make sure you have it when you need it the most.

Rocket is a vital ingredient of winter salads and can be grown all year round under cover. The 'wild' variety, *Eruca sativa* 'Skyrocket', has the most robust flavour and an upright habit that makes contamination with grit less of a problem, which is good because washing it seems to take the edge off the taste: just a quick rinse and shake is all you want to give it. It has a sweet, nutty flavour that's strong enough to make itself heard above the clutter of even the busiest salad, and even a few leaves can make a world of difference to a sandwich. There's a hint of bitterness too, which increases once it starts to form flowering stems, although you can still take leaves from lower down, and the flowers themselves are delicious.

Rocket is perennial, and in a polytunnel if you keep cutting it back it will keep on growing. For some reason it's largely ignored by butterflies, although not by flea beetles. If you decide that you prefer the younger, sweeter leaves then treat it as an annual; sow it every six weeks from early February until September, and then make a last, larger sowing for winter and the hungry gap. Once growth picks up next season, gradually reduce the number of plants until the first of your new sowings are ready to pick.

Wild rocket grown as a perennial. This one is in its third year.

Keep track of what works, and what doesn't, using a photo editor if possible. Thanks to Farm In My Pocket reader Jack Dolan for the suggestion.

KEEP RECORDS!

'Practice makes perfect' is as true in gardening under cover as it is in anything else, but good record keeping is the best way to make sure you don't keep making the same mistakes year after year. Bad results for a particular plant for a couple of years on the trot might make you want to give up trying it. If, on the other hand, you can see your planting dates and a few remarks on what the weather was like each month, you can see what the problem is… and fix it.

PARTICULAR PROBLEMS IN AUGUST

Things may be starting to cool off, but the sun is still powerful enough to raise temperatures in the polytunnel to 40°C (104°F) or even higher. This can make it difficult for some seeds such as lettuce or chicory to germinate. Water the seedbeds twice a day so they don't dry out, or start them on a capillary bench – or better still, bring them indoors where it's cooler until they raise their heads.

If you have brassicas in the tunnel, August is a dreadful month for butterflies. Unless you are both unusually attentive (and I'm being polite here) and gardening in a small tunnel, this means caterpillars. Rather than fighting a losing battle, beat the butterflies to it by netting the polytunnel doors or by growing your brassicas under fleece.

As with outside, the shortening days make larger plants like cucumbers and tomatoes begin to look tired and there is less new growth than before. By this stage I am always glad! This decline in vigour makes it more important to look after what you have, so that the plants remain healthy for as long as you want them. Keep spot-watering and feeding as before, and remove any debris or diseased foliage as soon as you see it.

Keep an eye out, too, for tomato blight. We covered this in last August's edition, but one thing has changed – potassium bicarbonate is now available for sale as a fungicide again from Garden Organic and others. Bicarbonate doesn't usually get rid of the blight completely, but it certainly slows it down long enough for you to save most of your tomatoes! Make up a spray with 10g per litre of water and a few drops of phosphate-free washing-up liquid (such as ECOVER) or Citrox as a wetting agent. Spray all affected foliage first thing in the morning, including the underside of leaves, once a week. Please note that bicarbonate should not be used as a routine preventative measure, only as a treatment when you know the disease is present.

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Further Info

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

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