SCHOOL & FAMILY GROWING GUIDES

FIRST TUNNELS

After-school gardening activities

15 little adventures in your polytunnel

Grow food, explore nature and get creative together. These quick ideas turn a little time after school into a whole lot of discovery.



Make the most of your polytunnel

Are you and your family making the most of your polytunnel during the working week as well as on weekends? Come rain or shine, a short visit after school can be a chance to grow, learn and have a laugh together.

These activities work for family growing spaces and school garden clubs. From sowing a few seeds to hunting for hidden garden helpers, choose an idea that suits your children, your crops and the season.

Pick your next adventure...



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GROW / TEND / TASTE

Grow something tasty



Five food-growing activities to try together.

1 Sow some seeds

Of course, a polytunnel enables you to sow and grow throughout the whole of the year, not just in the summer. No matter which month of the year you are in, there are some seeds that you and your kids might sow. Getting out into the polytunnel and sowing some seeds, either in beds within the polytunnel or in pots, will not take too long and can be the beginning of a life-long love of growing and the natural world. Make things more fun with quirky sowing activities like sowing a salad face with hair that grows, for example...

2 Make more plants

A very short period of time can also be used to demonstrate plant propagation and to obtain new plants from those that you already grow. Through much of the year, there are numerous plants that you might take cuttings from or propagate by division. Kids may enjoy competing over cuttings or divisions to see who can get theirs to grow largest most quickly, and will learn a lot about plants and their care in the process with just a little time after they get home from school.

3 Water and care

Polytunnel growing does not have to be a solitary pursuit. In fact, you can find that there is fun to be had in bringing the family to the polytunnel at the same time to garden together. Many hands make light work and even younger kids can be taught to water and weed and otherwise tend crops with you. Make sessions quick, easy and fun and the kids are less likely to balk at being involved.

4 Mix a plant potion

One other great quick after-school gardening activity for families is making plant potions to help the crops you grow thrive. Making organic plant feed is easy, and kids can pretend they are making plant potions and casting spells and engage in some other imaginative play. You might make a compost tea, or a concoction using plants that grow in your garden such as a comfrey liquid feed, or a nettle or general ‘weed’ tea, for example.

5 Harvest for dinner

Some of the most fun you can have in a food-producing polytunnel is when you are able to harvest the food that you have worked hard together to grow. Many crops can be harvested a little at a time, so a brief period after school might be enough time to harvest the things you need for dinner. The whole family getting involved with harvesting and picking will mean that they get to understand where their food comes from. And they can begin to appreciate the reward for efforts that they have put in earlier in the process.

LOOK / WONDER / EXPLORE

Be a garden scientist



Five little investigations for curious minds.

1 Race to the sky!

After sowing seeds together, you and your kids could monitor the progress plants make, and even ‘race’ plants against one another to see which grow tallest the fastest. This not only introduces the concept of healthy competition but also allows kids to learn a lot. Kids can learn about taking measurements, as well, of course, as learning about the different factors that can influence plant growth.

2 Become a pollinator

Kids will learn early about bees and other pollinators, and the basics of plant pollination, when you have a polytunnel where they can see things like this first hand. They can also learn a lot by becoming pollinators themselves, and aiding you in transfer of pollen from one flower to another or between the parts in flowers. Taking a little brush or similar, they can help you to improve fruit set on certain crops that you are growing and examine plant anatomy in more depth as they do so.

3 Investigate your soil

Simple tests can help kids and adults alike learn more about the soil in their gardens. Take a handful of garden soil and add water to make mud. Sprinkle baking soda onto it and if it fizzes up, the soil is acidic. (A reaction takes place because the baking soda is alkaline in nature.) If soil is alkaline or neutral, little to no reaction will occur. To tell if your soil is neutral or alkaline, add vinegar instead of baking soda. If the soil fizzes and bubbles when vinegar is added, it is alkaline. If no reaction occurs, it is probably neutral. These tests are not foolproof, and won’t tell you how acidic or alkaline your soil is. To determine the pH of your soil, buy a pH testing kit.

4 Discover the roots

Another simple but interesting thing to do with kids is to examine the roots on some of the plants that you grow. Kids can learn a lot simply by looking at the patterns of roots and their different forms, and you can use a quick study session as an opportunity to explain at their level how plants interact with the soil and the world around them in general.

5 Go on a bug hunt

Observation of the wildlife that shares your polytunnel garden can also be highly educational and a lot of fun. You and your kids will also get to know your garden a lot better if you go on a bug hunt and seek out some of the creatures around you in this space. Even a very brief period of time spent looking under leaves and perhaps delving a little below the soil could uncover a community of hidden helpers and pesky pests about which it is useful for everyone to learn more.

COLLECT / MAKE / CREATE

Get crafty!



Five creative projects inspired by your garden.

1 Give a pumpkin a pattern

One quick but fun activity for kids is to pre-decorate pumpkins or squash growing in the polytunnel for Halloween well ahead of time. Scratching names or other designs into squash or pumpkins while they are small will allow the kids to enjoy watching the marks expand as the fruits grow.

2 Make a nature collage

Another idea that won't take up much time is collecting natural items from the polytunnel such as leaves, sticks, flowers, etc. and using these to create your own crafty collages made from natural materials. If you have a table and chairs in your polytunnel, the polytunnel might not only provide materials for your artwork but also a place to indulge in your creative activities.

3 Create seed jewellery

Seeds from your polytunnel might be collected to eat, or to sow next year. But if you are feeling arty you might also use some artistically, to make some beads for jewellery etc... Seeds can potentially be painted using natural dyes and threaded onto some natural thread for all-natural bracelets or necklaces or other decorative items. Again, you can both source materials from your polytunnel, and potentially also use it as a space to undertake the activity.

4 Press some flowers

A polytunnel garden can brim with flowers throughout much of the year. And you and your kids might spend a brief amount of time after school collecting those flowers and pressing them. Those pressed flowers can then be used in a range of craft projects, or to decorate your home. This initial quick after-school gardening activity could lead on to several more.

5 Build a friendly scarecrow

Mostly for fun rather than to actually scare the birds, one other big art project that won't actually take too much time involves making a scarecrow or other fun figure for your garden. There are many different natural and reclaimed materials that you might use.