



GROWING GUIDE

top tips

what to grow...

january

January usually sees the top few inches of earth frozen solid everywhere in the garden. Even stalwart crops like kale droop and look decidedly unattractive. Parsnips and brussels lurk here and there but it's a wellies and warm coat job whenever they're needed. Everything else is just sitting under a thick mulch, waiting. Unless, of course, you have a polytunnel...

So, what difference can a polytunnel make to your gardening in January? First and foremost, it will allow you to keep lots of crops growing right through the winter and into the warmer days of spring. And when the sun does show itself, even in the depth of winter the temperature in a polytunnel will be warmed within minutes.

Working in a polytunnel over winter on a fine day you will be quite comfortable in jeans and a T-shirt - clearing weeds, cultivating, clipping a few leaves of this and that for dinner - while outside the temperature may well have stayed below freezing all day.

For gardening junkies like me, a polytunnel means there is more to winter than huddling round a fire with seed catalogues, dreaming of spring. In your polytunnel you can be actively sowing, growing and even harvesting right through the coldest months.



brrrrrrrrrrrgh!



Remove snow from your polytunnel with a soft brush



Remember to check inside your polytunnel regularly throughout winter



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There are several commercial heaters available burning either propane or paraffin, and these will keep the temperature well above freezing even in the coldest weather. However, be very careful when re-filling the paraffin - a spill on your soil will seriously damage your plants. So don't re-fill in the tunnel, take it outside onto a path.

I also use horticultural fleece cloches over the beds. These are made by placing a series of hoops, across the beds every few feet. Then I drape the fleece over the hoops. Fleece can be easily pulled back, either to allow access to the plants or to increase the light levels for the beds on warmer days, and put back again for overnight protection. There are several weights of fleece available: mine is fairly heavy and will protect the plants beneath from upto -6°C. When that is added to the protection already provided by a polytunnel, lots of salads and vegetables will survive all winter. And they'll be there whenever you like

A water butt is a great thing to have in a polytunnel - and the bigger, the better. Not only will it be handy for watering here and there but it will also retain available heat. The water will soak up the warmth when the sun comes out, then slowly release it overnight, just like a storage heater.



mini polytunnel?
watch the video



remember to vent!



You can share your ideas on heating and much more at facebook



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what to grow...

Sowing:

Broad beans, garlic/elephant garlic, peas (round-seed varieties) and turnip.

Beware of mice digging up the broad beans and peas!

They love 'em. Bottle cloches (i.e. plastic bottles cut into tubes roughly 15cm long and pushed into the earth around the seeds) will protect them from rodents.

Add a ring of copper tape roughly halfway up and you also have a good slug barrier. Garlic should be a reasonably safe bet and can be sown throughout the winter, and turnip seeds are able to germinate only a few degrees above freezing.

Growing:

Garlic/elephant garlic, and everything else on the 'harvesting' list.

Harvesting:

Beetroot, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, coriander, daikon, lettuce (and other salad greens), kohlrabi, mizuna, pak choi, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onion, turnip.

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to the top crops to grow
in your polytunnel





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what to grow...

february

Still winter, isn't it? But spring is just around the corner, so there's lots to do in the polytunnel. If you're planning your first polytunnel this year, a sunny day in February is a great time to put the cover on in time to get early spring plantings up and running far earlier than you could outside.

Plastic is more flexible when warm, but as long as the sun is out – even if it's a cold day – as soon as you pull the cover up over the hoops you'll be amazed how quickly it warms up inside. After just a few minutes, the cover will be flexible enough to tighten down, and you won't need to re-tighten it later in the year.

If you already have a polytunnel, February is a great month to clean up in preparation for the beginning of the growing season – March! There will be spaces here and there from winter harvesting, and you should fork some compost into all these as soon as possible. Staging and tools, as well as all your seedling pots, should get washed with a solution of warm water and a non-toxic biodegradable soap such as Algon. Clean the cover as well, inside and out, so everything can benefit from the increasing day length.



covering is much, much easier
when you use a base rail



watch the movie



make a clean start...
clean your polytunnel





GROWING

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february

what to grow...

top tips

I always start a few seeds in February just to see what I can get away with. A sunny windowsill, a cold frame and some horticultural fleece cloches all help with early crops. If you live in the north, you may want to consider starting a few seeds indoors under lights, not the 'greenest' way forward, but a 200-250W fluorescent light – designed for vegetation will allow you to start loads of veggies in a small space indoors without a costly spike in your electricity bill. And you'll only need to do this until you can start moving things out to the tunnel in March. Remember that sudden cold can be a serious shock to young plants, so put a cold frame or a fleece cloche or mini polytunnel in the tunnel to house them for the first 2-3 weeks. Once April arrives, it's unlikely that temperatures inside the tunnel will drop far enough to cause problems.

Water

February is a good time to get set up for the warmer weather so you don't get caught out when it arrives. An automatic watering system is a great time-saver once it's set up, but its timer is something you should thoroughly test before going on holiday!

Ventilation

Regular ventilation is essential, even during the colder months, as mould will spread quickly. While it's less likely to cause problems in winter it's still around, and low growth rates and light levels, together with a cold, damp environment, don't help. However, don't ever leave the tunnel open overnight in winter. I open the doors for a few hours in the middle of the day, whenever it's not too cold outside and especially if it's sunny, but if it's overcast and seriously cold I leave them closed. Once the weather warms, try to open the doors as soon as possible in the morning and close them again about half an hour before the sun stops hitting the tunnel. That way you'll get plenty of air circulation without losing valuable heat.



wrapped up warm



time to plan your watering and remember to test!



sliding doors make ventilation much easier



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what to grow...

Sowing:

Get some 'first early' seed potatoes and start 'chitting' them - set them out in egg boxes near a bright window so they begin to sprout. When the sprouts are about an inch long, plant the spuds in the tunnel. You'll be rewarded with the earliest of earlies sometime in the second half of April.

As well as continuing to sow broad beans, garlic/ elephant garlic, peas (round-seed varieties) and turnips you can also start sowing aubergines, peppers, strawberries, sweet potato and tomatoes and anything else on the 'harvesting' list below. And yes, I know, you're thinking 'Aubergines, peppers and tomatoes in February?' In a regular vegetable garden this would be a complete waste of time. But not in a polytunnel...

Growing:

Everything on the 'harvesting' list.

Harvesting:

Beetroot, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, coriander, daikon, kohlrabi, lettuce (and other salad greens), mizuna, pak choi, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onions, turnips.

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what to grow...

march

March often feels as if it's still winter, especially with its famous 'March winds' which can quickly make you wish you were back inside where it's warm. But in a polytunnel, the wind isn't a problem and you can focus instead on what's happening to all your overwintering plants – which are suddenly growing, and many of which are either actively bolting or thinking about it.

Broad beans and peas planted in January should begin to flower this month. However, if you planted them in late autumn they will be developing small pods. These will become a valuable source of food in the 'hungry gap', when there's nothing much left from winter and the spring crops aren't yet ready, which begins around the end of the month.

Overwintering plants such as celeriac, lettuce and pak choi will be very keen to bolt this month, but you can delay things by trimming off all but a few leaves. This will slow them down enough to allow you to continue to enjoy them well into April.

Celery will have recovered from the winter lull and should now be producing some beautiful edible stems. It won't last, so make the most of it!

While frost will have invariably killed off all my outside chard, the polytunnel plants will have survived but are now determined to bolt. However, one of the great things about chard is that the flavour of the leaves doesn't change, and as bolting is a long and quite spectacular process (flowering chard plants well over 2m tall...) they will tide you over until the younger plants are ready to pick from in June. A few plants in the polytunnel guarantees a year-round crop of this, surely one of the most valuable of all the 'green leaf' plants – and one that you hardly ever see in the shops.

If you started off any tomato plants under lights in January they should begin flowering about now. As it's roughly 60 days from seed to flower and another 60 days from flower to fruit, early tomato flowers means a crop that you can be enjoying long before any blight appears.

If you planted elephant garlic in October it should really be getting going now, and may easily be well over a foot tall.



watch our polytunnel surviving the gusty gails...



...whilst inside all is calm

MARCH APRIL MAY

HUNGRY
GAP



colourful chard will add the feel good factor to any polytunnel



GROWING



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march

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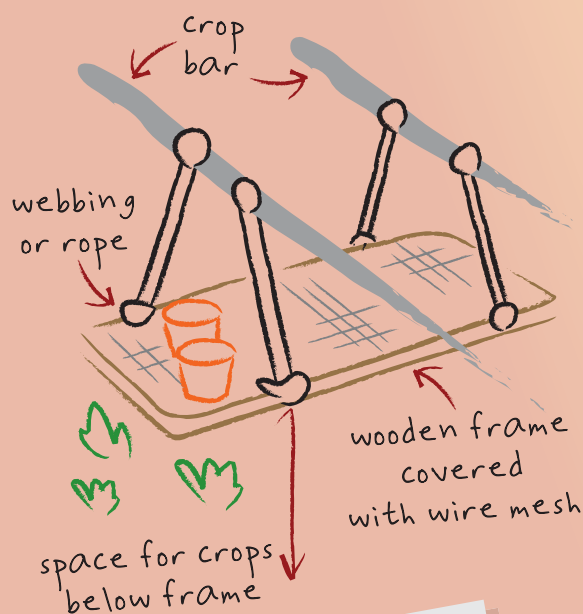
Sometime in March your polytunnel will take over from windowsills and cold frames as the best place for new seedlings, so you need to provide somewhere where they will a) get plenty of light and b) won't be constantly in the way. Rather than taking up valuable floor space, why not hang some staging from the crop bars? Ideally you want something that light can penetrate so only a little shade is cast on the beds beneath. A simple wood frame made from some scraps of 25x50mm and covered with a sheet of rectangular wire mesh (or similar) is ideal. Then, once your plants are big enough to go into a bed, you can take the staging down until it's needed again. Mine usually goes up in March, comes down in May, and goes back up again in late August for the autumn/winter crops.

As you take out the overwintering plants, fork in some new compost so the beds can sustain the season ahead – unless, of course, you are growing crops that prefer soil that is not too rich, such as carrots. Always keep note of what grew where so you can maintain a good crop rotation. This avoids nutrient deficiencies and also breaks the cycle of pests and diseases which can otherwise turn into a major problem.

March offers us a wide variety of weather. On colder days it's easy to forget that in the warmer climate of the polytunnel, plants are coming out of dormancy and therefore need more water than at any time over the past several months. Don't forget ventilation, either, or you could have a lot of sick plants on your hands. Taking care of both these will help ensure everything gets off to a great start, and stays that way.



crop bars are very, very versatile



sliding doors make ventilation much easier



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march

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Aubergine, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, chard, coriander, fennel, garlic/elephant garlic, kohlrabi, lettuce, spring onion, peppers, radish, rocket, spinach, strawberry plants, tomato.

March is actually a bit late for peppers. They do best when started really early, so if I planted them in February I don't usually sow more in March. However, if you missed February, do it now! You should still get a decent crop.



time is running out...get your peppers growing NOW!

Growing:

Everything on both the 'sowing' and 'harvesting' lists, plus peas, broad beans and potatoes.

Harvesting:

Beetroot, sprouting broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, coriander, kohlrabi, lettuce and other salad greens, spring onion, pak choi, radish, rocket, spinach, turnip.



oh the joy of delicious pak choi



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what to grow...

april

April...hmmm, let me see – oh yes, showers. Well, that's not going to bother me in the polytunnel! It's a wonderful gardening space at any time of year, but particularly when it's chucking it down outside. It's almost always warmer, and the air is calm. It might be a bit noisy, but that's only because of what's happening outside.

April is the month when the polytunnel gardener has to start taking care of two vitally important things on a daily basis: ventilation and watering. The sun in April is as strong as the sun in August, even though it might not feel as warm. In the sheltered space of the tunnel the interior can heat up extremely quickly. Unless you're careful, the combination of heat and a lack of water (because watering is entirely up to you and not the rain) will quickly lead to crop loss. Make sure the tunnel doors are open early in the day to prevent the interior getting too hot, and water as often as your plants need it. While this might sound vague, it really depends on your soil type. Sandy, well-drained soil could easily need watering daily; heavier, clay-based soil might only need it twice a week.

While you might not have noticed many slugs beforehand, in April they start to appear – and breed. Dealing with them now means a much reduced slug population later in the year. They tend to be out and about after dark, so get a torch and a collection pot and head off to the garden for a stroll every other evening. You'll be amazed how many there are!

If you planted for the 'hungry gap' and timed things right with staggered sowing last year, you should still be enjoying all kinds of vegetables in the polytunnel. Be sure to make notes of sowing times, conditions, planting-out times and varieties. If it all works, you'll want those notes again next year...and if it doesn't, you'll want to check them in order to avoid repeating your mistakes.

Hopefully you already have [staging](#) prepared for seedlings. Keep sowing! Lots of summer crops can be started in pots in the polytunnel and planted outside later.



watch how rain doesn't stop play



and see how to collect rain water...

MARCH APRIL MAY

HUNGRY
GAP



sow crops for summer



GROWING

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april

what to grow...

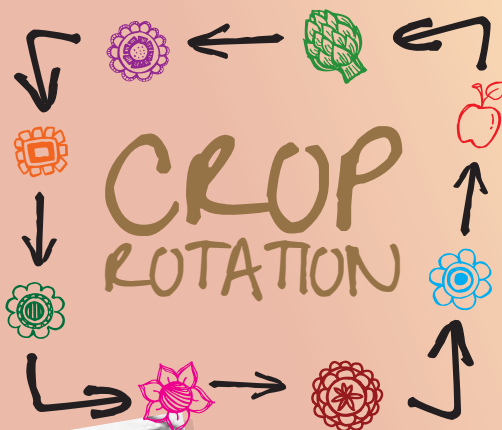
top tips

If you didn't make a crop rotation plan yet, you probably should make one now. April is a transition time between winter, the hungry gap and summer crops. While it might be tempting to fill every space that appears with a lettuce, don't get carried away. A crop rotation tells you exactly what grew where last year and over the winter, and shows you exactly where to put your summer crops to avoid pests and soil depletion. Crop rotations are especially important to organic gardeners who don't rely on chemical fertilisers and insecticides to create the appearance of a healthy growing environment. If you want a truly healthy garden, make a rotation plan and stick to it. You need a minimum of a three-year rotation in a polytunnel, but a four-year plan will be even better. For a 'starter' rotation plan, see chapter 8 of ['How To Grow Food In A Polytunnel'](#).

Avoid transplanting shock whenever possible. Lots of summer crops, including peas, beans, cucumbers and squash, hate being transplanted and their roots are easily damaged. To get around this problem, sow them in biodegradable pots – then you can just plant the whole thing with no transplant shock at all. Seeing the roots begin to grow through the sides of the pot is usually taken as a sign that it's ready to plant, but in fact it's better to wait just a little longer. 'Air pruning', the process of allowing these exposed roots to dry out and die, promotes lateral (rather than longitudinal) root growth within the pot. It's a process which is actively encouraged in the horticultural industry as it generally ensures a much healthier plant. Just don't let it go too far!

If you decide to invest in a soil thermometer, don't get one which contains mercury, as if it breaks it will add a very, very serious poison to the earth.

Keep a bag of compost to hand so that as gaps appear you can add more nutrients – as well as more plants.



find out more
about this book



soil thermometer



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GROWING GUIDE

april

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Sprouting broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, chard, coriander, courgette, cucumber, dwarf French bean and French beans, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, melon and watermelon, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onion, strawberries.

Aubergine and tomatoes are now off the list as ideally they should have been sown before April. If you forgot, give some a try – you never know, you might still get a crop.

Growing:

Everything on both the 'sowing' and 'harvesting' lists, plus peas, broad beans and potatoes.

Harvesting:

Broad bean, sprouting broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, coriander, kohlrabi, lettuce, peas, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onion, strawberries, turnip.

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fennel is now in full swing

strawberries are starting



elephant garlic



check out our guide to the top crops to grow in your polytunnel





GROWING GUIDE

top tips

what to grow...

may

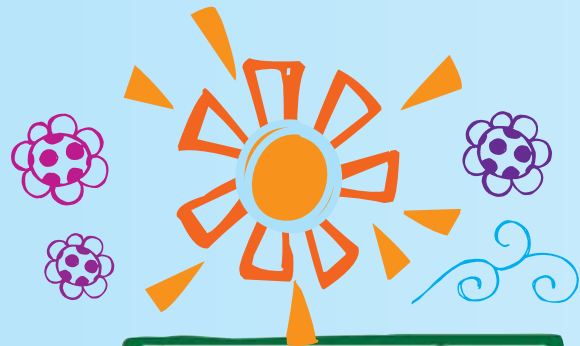
For me, once May begins summer has arrived – whatever the calendar says. For example, in 2010 ‘midsummer’s day’ was June 24th (as usual). However, and confusingly enough, midnight on June 21st was the beginning of the first official day of summer. Now, just how the first day of summer can be only three days from its middle is beyond me – and incidentally would mean summer was slightly less than a week long, which, even if true is very depressing indeed. So I just go by When It’s Warm...which means May – the sun is (probably) shining, and the polytunnel is absolutely exploding with growth.

May is one the most exciting months for the polytunnel gardener. All the plants suddenly seem to be quite capable of taking care of themselves, or even taking over completely if you let them. So, one important ‘thing to do’ in May is – don’t let them!

Any remaining overwintering plants, apart from broad beans and peas, are probably bolting like crazy. Most of them should have been removed by now as they either become woody, lose their flavour or both. Chard, on the other hand, stays tender right up to the point of collecting seeds, by which time it can be well over 2 metres tall and casting a very big shadow indeed. So, it’s unlikely to be something you allow to go to seed every year – and of course you won’t need to. A single chard plant will produce enough seeds for years, as well as plenty for your friends.

If you haven’t tried saving seeds before now, do give it a try this year. It’s easy, fun and incredibly productive. And, you are very likely to end up with better plants as a result. Don’t bother with hybrids (‘F1’ varieties) as the seed won’t breed ‘true’. Instead, look for ‘open pollinated’ (i.e. pollinated by wind or insects) varieties. So long as you don’t allow them to cross with other species (some will if you let them, such as carrots with Queen Anne’s Lace), these will breed ‘true’ – which is to say, they adapt. Instead of perfect clones, you get slight variations within a particular type. If you only save seeds from the best plants, i.e. those which were the last to bolt, and/or the healthiest and most productive – you might end up with something really worthwhile, and possibly even a whole new variety.

Lettuce, peas, tomatoes, climbing French beans – all these produce self-pollinating flowers and there’s very little need to worry about them crossing. Others are more difficult and may require isolation or protection. For lots more information on just how to save seeds from specific varieties as well as a list of useful seed suppliers, see [‘How To Grow Food In Your Polytunnel’](#).



see how sliding doors make ventilation a breeze



beware! chard will easily achieve over 2 metres tall



tomato flowers

GROWING



GUIDE

may

what to grow...

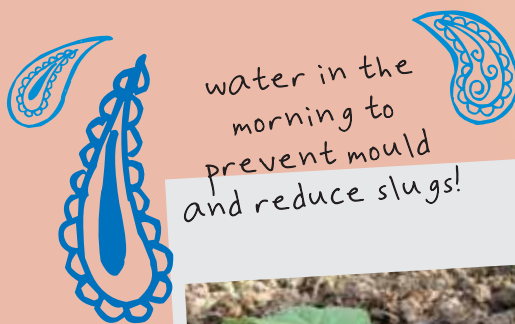
top tips

Many insects take to the air in May. Some are good for the garden (hover flies, bees, ladybirds) and some are bad (butterflies, aphids, carrot fly, flea beetles). All of them will find your polytunnel, and some might decide it's nice enough to stay. By hanging weighted mesh curtains across the polytunnel door openings, air can still circulate but you can keep most of the insects out. However, be warned: If you completely exclude insects, you will either have to go without particular crops (strawberries, for example) or pollinate the flowers by hand. This can usually be accomplished with a fine paintbrush, but it's very time-consuming. Instead, you might try a compromise: a reasonably coarse mesh will allow everything but butterflies through, so at least you can get a decent cauliflower crop!

Keep up the evening 'slug patrol' as this is their peak breeding time. Water in the mornings, so that leaf surfaces have time to dry before the evening. That makes it harder for slugs to get around, and there is less likelihood of mould developing. For the same reasons, don't let plants crowd each other. The health of your polytunnel depends on good air circulation as well as water and nutrients.



it's not just the plants who like living in your polytunnel



water in the morning to prevent mould and reduce slugs!

a copper collar is a great slug repellent too!





GROWING GUIDE



may

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Sprouting broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, coriander, courgette, cucumber, daikon, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, melon and watermelon, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onion, sweetcorn.

Don't forget to sow some sweetcorn! Polytunnel plants will be ready three to four weeks ahead of those planted outside, extending what is surely one of the best crops of the year.



enjoy your polytunnel sweetcorn 3-4 weeks before the outside crop

Harvesting:

Broad bean, sprouting broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, chard, coriander, kohlrabi, lettuce, onion, pak choi, peas, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onion, strawberries, turnip.

(I'm leaving out 'growing' for this month as it's all the plants on the 'sowing' and 'harvesting' lists, and should be for the next few months.)



perfect peas



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what to grow...

june

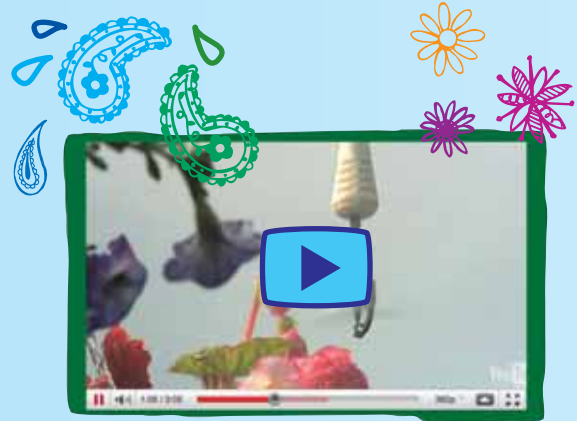
This is probably the peak of the polytunnel year in terms of plant growth, and it's a month when I seem to spend lots of time just wandering around, wondering what to pick next. There's just so much choice! Aside from a few peas and the last broad beans, none of the overwintering crops are left, unless a chard, beetroot or pak choi is being saved for seed. Everything else in the polytunnel is there for the summer season, and June is when some of the most eagerly anticipated crops of the entire year are finally ready for the harvest to begin.

The first aubergine. The first courgette. The first cucumber, the first climbing French beans, and possibly even the first tomatoes. What a mouth-watering list! For anyone who wonders why people get enthusiastic about gardening, the answer is simply 'June'.

Elephant garlic should have finished bulbing up and be ready to harvest this month. Gently clean the bulbs and leave somewhere warm and dry for a few days so the outer skin can cure. Lifting them makes room for a few more quick salad plants until the winter crops are ready to go in – which, despite this being the height of summer, isn't far away. One of the keys to good gardening is keeping the next few months in mind even while you enjoy the fruits of today. While cold-hardy winter lettuces are very welcome indeed in the cold weather, the more delicate summer lettuce varieties should now be doing really well, and the sheer variety of the salad plants available is amazing.

Typically in June, I can pick these kinds of salad: 5 types of lettuce, spinach, parsley, celery, a sprinkling of fresh dill leaves, a beetroot to grate, rocket, radish, baby carrots, peas, cucumber and a tomato or two – all to hand within a few paces of each other. Add to that some chives, a sprig of mint, some fresh snow peas and a couple of stems of asparagus from the outside garden, and you have an amazing, wonderful, colourful salad that's absolutely stuffed with flavour in every bite. And, of course, it's all as fresh as can be. For lots more information on maximising polytunnel crops, see ['How To Grow Food In Your Polytunnel'](#).

As well as all these there are still the polytunnel stalwarts of cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, chard, coriander and spring onion – all of which (as well as radish and rocket) can be grown and harvested all year round.



irrigation is REALLY important during the summer months watch our watering solutions



the anticipation is building for the FIRST crops of the summer



lettuce entertain you



in the pink...raddish

GROWING



GUIDE

june

what to grow...

top tips

Plants will grow really quickly in June and it's very important not to let them get too crowded. Moulds and pests will lurk in unseen corners and before you know it you've lost a load of plants and/or have a major problem on your hands. Ventilate the polytunnel every day without fail, even if it's raining outside. One of the most difficult things to control in a polytunnel is the humidity, and ventilation is the key.

Plant a few flowers in pots – marigolds are ideal – so that you can move them around easily. These will flower right up until the frosts, they look great, they don't get too big and they attract a host of beneficial insects such as hover flies.

Hover flies are great pollinators and even better pest-predators. Marigold's comparatively strong scent might also help to confuse carrot fly, though these are very rarely a problem in a polytunnel. Their only drawback is their vulnerability to slugs, especially when young. However, a strip of copper tape around the outside of the pot stops slugs in their tracks and protects the plant – a solution that can be applied anywhere slugs are a problem.



marigolds are
pretty fantastic



blooming marvellous



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GROWING GUIDE



june

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, coriander, daikon, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, spring onions, pak choi, radish, rocket.

It's a slim month for sowing – but just look at the harvesting list!

Harvesting:

Aubergine, broad beans, French and dwarf French beans, sprouting broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celery, chard, coriander, courgette, cucumber, elephant garlic, kohlrabi, lettuce, onion, spring onion, pak choi, peas, radish, rocket, spinach, strawberry, tomato.

And yes, turnip could have been on the list, too – but at this time of year it's easy enough to grow them, and many other vegetables as well, outside rather than taking up valuable polytunnel space.

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harvest straight on to the BBQ...yum



watch the plot to plate video



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what to grow...

july

July and August often see summer turn into an overcast damp mugh in the UK, and when that happens it's a time to keep an eye open for blight. This serious disease, which affects both potatoes and tomatoes, is caused by the tiny, wind-blown spores of a fungus called 'phytophthora infestans'. Blight was responsible for the Irish Potato Famine many years ago, and it's still with us today. Not only that, it's with us just about everywhere. Whether or not you actually get a blight infestation depends mostly on the weather, and partly on you.

While you're unlikely to have potatoes growing in the polytunnel, tomatoes are a very common crop. Unfortunately, polytunnels tend to be havens for blight due to their high relative humidity levels – and, as is true with almost all disease and pest problems in the polytunnel, once you have it, it's difficult to get rid of it.

Prevention is the best cure – as there is no 'real' cure. Blight can only take hold in damp or wet conditions, so make sure your plants have plenty of space around them. When they're tall enough, remove all the leaves up to a height of 30cms. This improves ventilation, especially lower down where the air stays cooler, which in turn helps keep the leaves dry.

'Smith Periods' are weather patterns likely to result in the spread of blight spores. They are calculated using temperature and relative humidity data, and until recently predictions were restricted to a few Met stations dotted around the UK. The [Blightwatch website](#) is FREE to sign up, for Smith Period warnings that are now calculated based on data from the entire UK at postcode level. Once you register you can request warnings, either by email or text to your mobile phone of Smith Periods in up to 10 postcodes near your garden or allotment.

If blight arrives, all you can do is try to slow it down. Remove any affected leaves or fruit immediately, then spray everything – yes, the entire polytunnel – with a solution of bicarbonate (baking soda), 10g per litre. Add a couple of drops of a plant-based detergent to help the solution stick to the leaves. It's a good idea to begin spraying before you see any sign of blight, so make this a bi-weekly task from the beginning of the month.

Blight tends to affect older leaves first, but not always. Leaf edges begin to turn brown, watery, and quickly shrivel and collapse. Fruit will become discoloured at first, then decay quickly, preventing even short-term storage.

Advice about blight disagrees on whether or not it is truly capable of overwintering in the soil. Many, including the RHS, are convinced that it can. Either way, it is definitely capable of genetic mutation producing new strains capable of infecting varieties of potato previously considered 'blight resistant'; all tomato varieties will eventually succumb to blight if the conditions are bad enough.

This, of course, is a very good reason to get an early start on tomato plants. If your area is prone to blight, choose very early varieties – then you have some hope of getting a crop before disaster strikes. I normally start a couple of 'early' plants indoors in February, and last year I had fruit from them in June.



keep an eye out for any trace of these marks

once your crops are well established remove all the leaves from the first 30cm, keeping crops drier and healthier

REMEMBER
30CM



visit blightwatch NOW!

SPRAY
SPRAY
SPRAY
AWAY
AWAY
AWAY



10g per litre
bicarbonate of soda



GROWING



GUIDE

july

what to grow...

top tips

Start sowing seeds for winter and the hungry gap this month! And yes, I know it's the peak of summertime, but you have to give the seedlings a good start as they've got some pretty thin months ahead of them. Don't forget cold-hardy lettuce varieties such as Rouge d'Hiver and Bronze Arrow which will survive even when there's frost on their leaves. For detailed information on sowing, growing and harvesting times for all polytunnel vegetable crops, see ['How To Grow Food In Your Polytunnel'](#).

MARCH APRIL MAY

HUN GRY

G ↑ P

it might seem a long way off
but now is the time to get
planting to ensure there are
crops right through the
spring next year



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GROWING GUIDE



july

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Beetroot, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, coriander, daikon, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, spring onion, pak choi, radish, rocket, strawberries, turnip.

Harvesting:

Aubergine, broad beans, French and dwarf French beans, sprouting broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celery, chard, coriander, courgette, cucumber, elephant garlic, kohlrabi, lettuce, onion, spring onion, pak choi, peas, radish, rocket, spinach, strawberry, tomato.

And finally sweet corn and sweet peppers both make it on to the 'harvesting' list. Dinner is served...



the wait is over
time to pick
the peppers!



and enjoy some sweetcorn...
bring on the bbq

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check out our guide
to the top crops to grow
in your polytunnel





GROWING GUIDE

top tips

what to grow...

august

Going on holiday? Who will water the polytunnel?
If you are going away this year, you have two choices:

- 1) Ask someone, very nicely, if they would mind spending between two and seven hours a week (depending on your soil type) watering the polytunnel – oh, and would they please do it in the morning, so the leaves have time to dry out?
- 2) Get an automatic watering kit, set it up and test it thoroughly before you leave so you can actually relax when you're on the beach somewhere exotic.

Can you guess which is my preference? In fact, we're very lucky in having good help close to hand – and as they're farmers, they hardly ever go away themselves. But they're not gardeners. Sheep, great. Chickens, no problem. Lettuces...huh?

And therein lies the problem. Nobody will take care of your garden the way you would yourself, even if they are gardeners themselves. A good friend of mine left his organic garden in what he thought were the safe hands of an experienced gardener and came home to find slug pellets scattered all over the place. Gardening is a process, and only by being there over time will you get a feel for how this plant is developing, how that one needs more water than those, and so on.

If you decide on an automatic watering system, you again have a variety of decisions to make. Some kits rely on a gravity feed from a central reservoir, while others are [battery-operated timers](#) that hook up directly to a tap. If you are a natural pessimist, you might want to avoid imagining the timer...malfunctioning...and test it thoroughly!

You'll also need to choose between [drippers](#), sprayers or [soakers](#). Which one is best for a particular bed, or particular plant? If you use a dripper, all the water lands on one small spot of earth. If you use sprayers, they'll soak everything within range – and unless you figure out the timing carefully you might end up with blight or mould. If you use soakers, you can't really regulate the water from plant to plant as they leak along their entire length. This makes them good choices for beds rather than for individual plants.

As you can see, it's not completely straightforward. But, automatic systems are great fun for people who like to fiddle with stuff, and, once they're set up, they're a huge time-saving on manual watering – because, of course, you don't have to restrict their use to the days on which you're actually away. Why not just leave it on all the time? You can move [drippers](#) and sprayers, or remove them from the system altogether. [Soaker hose](#) is a little more difficult as often it's placed under a layer of mulch, or even buried just below the surface of the soil, and in trying to move them you risk damaging your plants. For more information on automatic watering systems, see the [irrigation options section](#).



watch our automatic watering system in action



see the various sprinkler options too



see the drippa system



watch the soaker hose spring into life



GROWING



GUIDE

august

what to grow...

top tips

Continue sowing seeds for winter and the hungry gap.
Don't leave it until it's too late! September sowings of many plants are unlikely to provide crops before the following spring, so if you don't get around to it this month, you might have missed your chance.

MARCH APRIL MAY



HUN GRY
GAP

time is running out...
get a move on



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GROWING GUIDE

august

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Beetroot, sprouting broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, coriander, daikon, kohlrabi, lettuce, spring onion, pak choi, peas, radish, rocket, strawberries, sweet potato, potato, turnip.

Note - we now have sweet potato. As a long-season crop it won't be ready to harvest until Autumn the following year. Cuttings can be rooted in August to overwinter in pots before planting the following May. And, if you manage to save a few 'first earlies' from your spring potato planting, you could plant a few in the polytunnel this month in hopes of a harvest in December, imagine – home-grown new potatoes for Christmas dinner!

Harvesting:

Aubergine, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celery, chard, coriander, courgette, cucumber, daikon, dwarf French beans, French beans, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, pepper, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onion, strawberries, sweet corn, tomato.

Melons...and possibly even watermelons...even if you live in the north!

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fantastic fennel



refreshing melon

check out our guide to the top crops to grow in your polytunnel





GROWING GUIDE

top tips

what to grow...

september

The crisp, cool mornings that start to appear in the second half of August become regular feature during September, signalling the approach of Autumn. If you sowed seeds for a winter/hungry gap harvest in July and August, you should be assured of a supply of fresh vegetables right through until the Spring. If you didn't, it's probably too late for much of a Winter crop, but it's still OK for the hungry gap. Especially in a polytunnel, where you can really stretch the limits of what you'd grow outside. And, if we get an 'Indian Summer', it may stay warm enough for your Winter crop seedlings to get to a good size before the cold weather stops them. Either way, 'hungry gap' crops such as sprouting broccoli, early cabbage varieties, coriander and spinach should be ready sometime in April if you sow them now.

September is also decision time for polytunnel gardeners: do you leave that 'summer' plant in place in hope of a continuing harvest, or do you take it out and replace it with some of your winter crop seedlings? I always face a dilemma over this, but sometimes my decision is made for me – such as when I accidentally stepped on the courgette I was hoping to nurture into November! However, it's not a time to dither: two weeks of growth at this time of year can make a huge difference later on, and you miss it at your peril.

If you're planning on overwintering peas and broad beans, September (or even early October) is the ideal time to sow them. They should then be big enough to stand through the cold weather (unless it's really cold, in which case they'll need protection) and will grow on in February and March to provide a welcome harvest starting sometime in April.

Climbers such as cucumbers and melons should have been grown near the cover on the north side of the polytunnel so they don't take up valuable bed space or cast too much shade. Leave them in place for now, as cucumbers can bear fruit well into November (possibly even December) and melons will ripen between mid-August and the end of this month. Cucumbers should not be stored in the fridge or they will go soft after just a few days. Instead, wrap them in cling film and put them somewhere dark and cool. So long as they don't freeze they will keep for several weeks – you might even end up putting them in a salad over the Christmas holidays!



Cucumbers 'til
CHRISTMAS!

hoe, hoe, hoe

GROWING



GUIDE

september

what to grow...

top tips

If you had an onion crop in an outside bed, or in the polytunnel, your polytunnel is an ideal place to dry them for storage. As it's much warmer near the ridge of the polytunnel a suspended shelf or net hung several feet off the ground makes a great drying rack. Turn the onions every couple of days to ensure they dry evenly, and don't pack them away for storage until their necks are completely dry. To check, grip the neck just above the bulb and roll it between your fingers. If it feels at all soft, there's still moisture inside and it should need to dry further. Incidentally, bending down the necks of ripening onions while they're still in the ground can sometimes lead to trapped moisture that will be very slow to dry. To learn how to braid your own onion and garlic strings, see ['How To Grow Food In Your Polytunnel'](#) book.

If you have an automatic watering system in place, September will see a marked decrease in the amount of water your plants need: check to make sure they're not getting too much.



know your onions...
suspended shelving
from crops bars...perfect



find out more about
the versatility and strength
of crop bars



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GROWING GUIDE



september

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Sprouting broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, coriander, daikon, kohlrabi, lettuce, peas, radish, rocket, spring onions, strawberries.

Harvesting:

Aubergine, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, coriander, courgette, cucumber, daikon, dwarf French and French beans, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, melon and watermelon, pak choi, pepper, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onions, strawberries, sweet potatoes, tomato.



harvesting just doesn't get any better than this



simply the freshest food



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GROWING GUIDE

top tips

what to grow...

october

Winter is almost upon us, even though summer has barely ended and the garden still looks great. Don't be fooled! October is your last chance to get ready for the winter ahead. If you still have a courgette in the polytunnel, in most cases you should be asking yourself 'why?', and then pulling it out to make room for winter and hungry gap crops. Courgettes are big, sprawling plants that are unlikely to continue to bear much beyond the end of the month, so you'll only be losing the last few. Peppers, on the other hand, can continue to produce well into December. Every year, as peppers are perennials, I try to nurture a few right through to the spring, though I haven't managed it yet!

If you have an empty spot or two, tender plants such as celery and fennel can be brought into the polytunnel and heeled-in, and if you've been caught out by the severity of the last couple of winters you might want to bring in a few leeks as well. While these are considered hardy plants, bouts of heavy frost will gradually kill them, layer by layer.

Broad beans and peas sown now should ideally be no higher than 30cms when cold weather ahead stops their growth. Then, if the weather gets cold enough for them to need some additional protection, they are still small enough to fit under a fleece cloche. Once the light levels increase in spring they'll be off and running and should give you a nice harvest during the hungry gap.

Otherwise, there's not a great deal of sowing to be done in October, so it's a good time to clean up.



time to get the hardy winter crops in place



there's plenty more where that came from...
peppers will produce well into December



GOING UNDERCOVER



bring these plants into the polytunnel for winter





GROWING

GUIDE

october

what to grow...

top tips

Clear up any debris to avoid unwanted guests overwintering in the polytunnel. Many pests become dormant during this time and would like nothing better than a cosy, undisturbed spot in the sheltered environment of your polytunnel, and as well as smaller insects this can also include rodents. With this in mind, don't use the polytunnel as a storage shed – it's far more useful as a growing area.

Sisal or jute growing strings can harbour mould and mildew through to the spring, so take them down and compost them.

Wipe all exposed surfaces with a mixture of bicarbonate (baking soda) and water, 10g to a litre, and add a few drops of [Algon](#) to help it stick to surfaces. Bicarbonate is a natural anti-fungal compound which will help give the polytunnel a clean start for the cold, damp months ahead.

As bare earth appears, dig in some compost. It's better to use it now so that it can be incorporated into the earth rather than storing it until the spring.

The worst weather of the year is just ahead. Check now to see if you have any breaks or cuts in the polytunnel cover, especially around the doors. Clean the surrounding area first, then, when it's completely dry, use polytunnel repair tape on both sides. Once the repairs are finished, wash the cover – even if you think it doesn't really need it. You'll be amazed at the difference it makes. Winter is the darkest time of the year, and your polytunnel plants will appreciate the difference a clean cover makes.

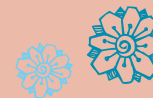
see the difference staging can make to the usable space inside your polytunnel



now is the time to make sure everything is cleaned



small polythene repairs are easily sorted with repair tape





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GROWING GUIDE

october

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Broad beans, cabbage, cauliflower, coriander, kohlrabi, peas, radish, spring onions.

Harvesting:

Aubergine, beetroot, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, coriander, courgette, cucumber, daikon, dwarf French and French beans, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, pak choi, pepper, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onions, strawberries, sweet potatoes, tomato.



protect your
new seedlings
with
bottle cloches



strawberries are still coming

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GROWING GUIDE

top tips

what to grow...

november

November is a quiet month in the outside garden, while in the polytunnel a wide range of crops continues to thrive – unless you forgot to add some frost protection. If you didn't address that yet, you should do so now. Otherwise, a single night of frost may kill or seriously damage many of the polytunnel crops – lettuce, pak choi, radish, Chinese cabbage, celery, rocket, mustard greens and chard – that you are hoping to harvest during the winter and early spring.

I use fleece cloches, each made from a strip of [horticultural fleece](#) about 2 metres wide and about a metre longer than the bed at each end. Hoops of 25mm-diameter are held in place across the bed, every 1.5m. I tie Bamboo canes along the top to create a ridge, adding strength to the structure as well as support for the fleece. The fleece is then draped over the whole thing, and the extra length hangs down at the ends to enclose the protected area. See '[How To Grow Food In Your Polytunnel](#)' for pictures of a fleece cloche in place and detailed instructions on making one.

Because fleece prevents a few percent of the light hitting from getting through to the plants beneath, and also as it restricts ventilation, it isn't something that should stay in place over the beds during warmer weather. My design is tied to bamboo stakes on the far side of the bed, and strings are tied to it at intervals along its near side. Then I can lift the fleece and push it back out of the way, or pull it into back position again quickly and easily.

I normally set up my frost protection by the end of October, but that's because I like to stay a step or two ahead of January and February, usually the coldest months in the UK. They then stay in place until mid-April.



fleece cloche protection for your plants



mini polytunnels are a really effective protection for your plants, see how





GROWING

GUIDE

november

what to grow...

top tips

If you have an automatic watering system in place it's a good idea to shut it down at the beginning of the month. Your plants will need far less water during the winter than the rest of the year, and closing the system gives you the chance to clean and maintain it as well as preventing frost damage.

Keep some water near to hand in your polytunnel, as during the winter it can act as a heat sink and help to keep the internal temperature just that little bit higher. A water butt is ideal, and once the weather warms up again you'll be even happier you installed one – they're great for watering seedlings while you figure out where to put the automatic system.

If you plan on heating your polytunnel over the winter, there are several options. Unfortunately polythene doesn't hold heat quite as well as glass. However, if you put up a layer of bubble wrap inside your polytunnel you can substantially increase the insulation properties of the cover, and reduce heating costs. [Polytunnel heaters](#) run on bottled gas, paraffin, or electricity. The first two generate water as a by-product and the polytunnel will require more ventilation as a result, while electricity is the most expensive option of the three.

Continue to add compost to any bare patches that appear in the beds as you harvest your winter crops.





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GROWING GUIDE



november

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Broad beans, cabbage, coriander, garlic and elephant garlic. November is a great month for sowing garlic and elephant garlic, both of which need a period of cold weather to develop a good root system, leading to really big bulbs the following year.

Harvesting:

Aubergine, beetroot, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, coriander, courgette, cucumber, daikon, dwarf French and French beans, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, pak choi, pepper, radish, rocket, spinach, spring onions, strawberries, sweet potatoes, tomato, turnip.

You're unlikely to get either courgettes or cucumbers to continue right until the end of the month, but you never know...



grow, grow
garlic

don't
forget the
elephant
garlic too



fresh spinach



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GROWING GUIDE

top tips

what to grow...

december

In December daylight levels are at their lowest ebb, and even if you've gone to the trouble of installing a heater you won't see a huge difference in the growth rate of your polytunnel plants. However, another thing you won't see is frost damage, even without the protection of a [fleece cloche](#). In an unheated polytunnel frost protection is essential and without it the plants you could be harvesting this month may not have survived even thus far, let alone through the coming months.

Now is when you can really begin to see the difference between the polytunnel beds and those outside. Inside the polytunnel, you could have fat, juicy lettuces, beetroot, mizuna and mustard greens, radish, pak choi and more – but you won't find any of those outside at this time of year! This is what polytunnel growing is all about. It's easy enough to grow vegetables of all kinds outside during the summer, but to have your very own walk-in larder of fresh, organic vegetables at this time of year is downright special. When, for instance, did you last pick a salad in December? If you don't have a polytunnel, you would probably have needed to live somewhere far south of the UK to do so – but if you have a polytunnel, you could live in the north of Scotland and still be able to pick lettuce right the way through the winter.

Broad beans and peas sown earlier may be taller than 30cm by now, and it could be difficult to cover them with [fleece](#) if frosts threaten. While winter varieties of both are hardy enough to withstand sub-zero temperatures, if a cold snap is set to continue you may nevertheless need to provide some additional protection. Even if the low temperature doesn't kill them, it will cause them to droop. When it warms up again they will brighten up and carry on, but if frosts continue for too long the stems can fold over, creating a kink from which they are unlikely to recover. To help prevent this, tie broad beans up to strings or bamboo canes. Peas normally use their tendrils to hang on to things, but the cold may make them slacken their grip, and unless you tie them in place they may keel over and die.

It's quite possible that peas will flower and even produce pods in December. If this happens, remove (and eat!) them to prevent the plant getting the message that it's all over. They will then continue to pod in the spring.

If you need to water, try to do so early in the day. Avoid wetting the leaf surfaces, as on overcast days the polytunnel will stay very cool and evaporation is at a minimum. If the leaves are still wet when night comes, this could result in frost damage.



oh baby it's cold outside



but inside the polytunnel there's an abundance of crops to enjoy



peas and broad beans a plenty even in December



be really, really careful when watering and ONLY water in the mornings

GROWING



GUIDE

december

what to grow...

top tips

Tips this month apply for the entire winter period:

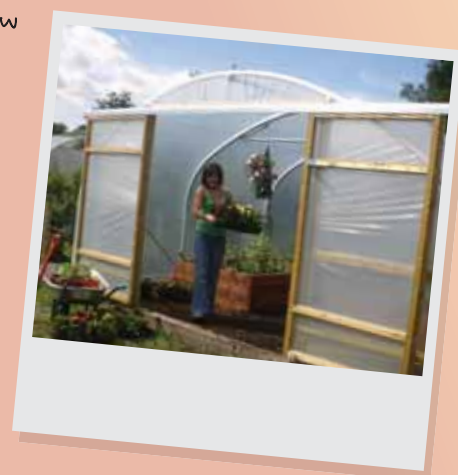
Keep everything well ventilated: whenever it's possible, open the doors for a few hours even on overcast, cool days. Only if it's really cold should the polytunnel remain closed all day. Don't forget to close them again well before it gets dark, as once it does so the temperature will plummet.

Clear up debris regularly and often. Left alone it will quickly become a source of mould, a habitat for pests, or both!

Don't neglect watering. Even though plants require far less water during the winter the beds shouldn't dry out.



ventilation is soooooo much
easier to control with sliding doors
watch how





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GROWING GUIDE

december

top tips

what to grow...

Sowing:

Coriander, grapevines - November and December are both recommended for planting grapevines as while they are dormant they can be pruned without damaging the plant.

Harvesting:

Beetroot, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, coriander, daikon, fennel, kohlrabi, lettuce, pak choi, pepper, radish, potatoes, rocket, spinach, spring onions, turnip.

Celery will probably become poor towards the end of the month. However, and as it's unlikely you have anything to plant in its place, just leave it. Once spring begins to warm things up it will become productive again for a while before finally bolting.



fancy making your own wine?

well now is the time to get your vines planted



celery will tail off, then come back

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