

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are one of the most popular plants for UK gardeners to grow. They're moderately fussy plants, needing constant feeding, frequent watering, and a calm and sunny spot. Despite all this they're very rewarding, and with so many varieties available you can try a new one every year if you like. Growing in your polytunnel lets you grow serious amounts of tomatoes, and frees you from the few varieties that will tolerate being grown outdoors. Your biggest headache will be choosing which ones to grow next; purple or striped fruit, sharp or sweet, huge and fleshy or tiny and juicy?

Varieties: 'Latah', 'Red Cluster Pear', 'Harbinger'

Sowing: Tomatoes are not difficult to grow from seed, but the key to getting good results is to give your plants the longest growing season you can. In most of the country getting things started early on a sunny windowsill is fine, but in northerly areas it is better to buy young plants from a local nursery, which will have kick-started the whole process for you using heat and growing lights.

For strong plants without the risk of stunting, tomato seeds should be sown in modules of seed compost around the middle of March and given a warm and well-lit spot, such as an indoor windowsill, until they can be brought out to the tunnel some time in April. Sow seeds into 9cm pots, 0.5cm deep. Germination is usually good, so don't sow more than two or three to a pot, and thin to the best plant when they're 2 or 3cm tall.



sun dried or fried?



salads and soups

homemade pasta sauce





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels

TOP CROPS

OF THE



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

Tomatoes

harvest

growing

When roots appear at the bottom of the plant pots, pot your seedlings on into larger pots of potting compost. Unlike most other plants, tomatoes will tolerate being planted so deeply that only their top set of leaves are left above the surface; the buried portion will sprout more roots, giving a stronger plant. Wait until the first flowers have formed before you set tomato plants out into their final growing positions in the soil beds, or in large pots or grow bags.

When planting tomatoes into the soil beds, dig lots of fresh compost and a handful of comfrey pellets into each planting spot. Don't make the mistake of crowding in too many plants, as good airflow round the leaves is vitally important to reduce the chance of tomato blight (see 'harvest' tab) infecting your tunnel. Leave at least as much space as the seed merchant recommends, and provide a support for each plant. Tie them in every 25cm or so, and nip off any side-shoots that develop from the leaf joints so that you are left with a single upright vine.

Tomatoes are hungry plants and need to be fed with tomato fertilizer starting as soon as the first flowers appear, but watering is absolutely crucial for top-quality fruit. Never let the soil dry out – and this makes growbags less than ideal. If you do opt for them, use two to make an extra deep one: put one on top of the other, and push your trowel through the bottom of the top bag. Your plants will soon find the hole, and will be glad of the extra moisture on hot days.

TOP TIP
tie in each
plant



TOP TIP
when first flowers appear
time to start using
fertiliser and increase
watering



WATER, WATER...
and more water
for the best fruit

TOP TIP
install an
irrigation
system



[Big drippa
more info](#)



FIRST TUNNELS
www.FirstTunnels.co.uk

FREE
DOWNLOAD



Tomatoes

growing

harvest

Diseases and pests: Tomatoes can be affected by whitefly, red spider mites, aphids and various foliage diseases, but by far the most serious problem is blight, which can occur any time from early July. Tomato blight starts as irregular shadowy patches on the leaves which turn into a watery rot that causes foliage to collapse, shrivel and turn brown. Blight spreads quickly in the humid conditions of the tunnel, but if you spot it early enough you can slow down its advance by removing infected foliage (burn it, bin it, or bury it deep inside a hot compost heap) and spraying the remaining plants with 10g of sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) in a litre of water.

Harvest from June/July: Unlike shop-bought fruit, properly ripe tomatoes should give a little when squeezed gently. Harvest each fruit as it becomes ripe, levering it up so that the calyx (the little tuft of green leaves at the top of the fruit) comes with it, and use within a few days. Fruit kept in the fridge will keep for a couple of weeks but the flavour weakens with storage. And what flavour!

Recipe: Tomatoes can be used for loads and loads of fantastic recipes, find the varieties you like and grow, grow, grow...

Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk



BLIGHT TOP TIP
keep a close eye on the leaves of your plants and remove these leaves as soon as possible



savour the flavour!

Sweetcorn

Rewarding and generally problem-free, sweetcorn is easy to grow outside in most of England but becomes harder the further north you go, with harvests becoming unreliable any further north than Yorkshire. Using a polytunnel, however, you can grow sweetcorn successfully in the Shetland Islands – and gardeners in the south can use their tunnel to harvest perfect ears of corn weeks earlier than their outdoor plants. Sweetcorn loves the rich soil and protection from high winds inside a polytunnel, and once germinated they don't need much attention beyond keeping them well fed.

Sweetcorn loses sweetness from the moment it is picked, which means that homegrown corn tastes far better than corn bought in the supermarket. It does take up quite a bit of space, but the leaves let a lot of light through to the ground which means you can grow other plants (particularly low-growing legumes like dwarf french beans) between them.

Varieties: Butterscotch (for far northern areas) and Swift. Keep seed for no longer than a year, as the quality suffers with storage.

Sowing: Sweetcorn can be sown direct in the tunnel in mid-May, but for the earliest harvest they should be started off on a sunny windowsill indoors from mid-April to early May. Sweetcorn plants hate root disturbance, so plant them 2.5cm deep in biodegradable pots, allowing two seeds per tube to account for failures. Ordinary potting compost is fine.

If you haven't already prepared the bed for sweetcorn, get it done when you sow: incorporate lots of compost into the soil and add a handful of bonemeal per square meter, then water the bed well.



striking GOLD...
sweet
😊



fantastic BBQ food



keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels

TOP OF THE CROPS



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

sweetcorn

harvest

growing

To make sure that sweetcorn is pollinated properly, it is best grown in a block rather than in rows or singly. As soon as roots start to push through the cardboard, plant the seedlings, pot and all, into their final positions allowing a minimum spacing of 15cm x 25cm. As they grow, the plants may produce side-shoots, but there's no need to remove them.

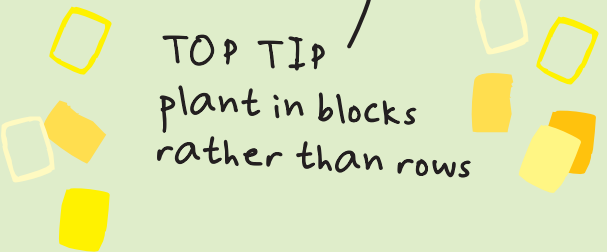
Once the plants are established, begin feeding with tomato fertilizer every fortnight, and keep this up until you harvest. Increase the amount of water you give once the ears begin to form, but never allow the bed to become waterlogged. When the tall feathery 'tassels' (male flowers) appear at the top of the plants, tap the stems each morning so that the powdery pollen falls from them.

Diseases and pests: The only likely problem in the UK is theft – usually by rodents, but if you're really unlucky by badgers or deer – once the corn begins to ripen. If your tunnel receives unwanted attention, harvest the remaining ears as soon as possible.

TOP TIP
tap the pollen off the
ears each day



TOP TIP
plant in blocks
rather than rows



LOOK OUT!
for mice
helping
themselves
to your corn





FIRST TUNNELS

www.FirstTunnels.co.uk



sweetcorn

growing

harvest

Harvest from July to September. As soon as the silks on the end of the ears of corn turn brown and start to shrivel up, you can test to see if the kernels are ripe. Gently peel one ear open a little to see the kernels, and pop one with your fingernail. If the liquid is watery, leave the corn a few more days; if it's creamy, the corn is ready to harvest. Any ears you don't want right away will keep best on the plant, but don't leave them too long. If popping a kernel shows that the liquid inside is becoming doughy, the corn is overripe – harvest the rest immediately.

Recipe: By far the tastiest way to enjoy sweetcorn is to take it straight from the plant to the barbeque. Twist whole ears from the plant and put them, without removing any of the outer leaves, into a bucket of cold water. After leaving them to soak for half an hour take them out, give them a bit of a shake, and put them on the BBQ grill for 25 minutes, turning several times to distribute the heat. The outer leaves will turn black, but when you peel them away the corn will be perfect and ready to eat straight away. Just try not to burn your mouth...



Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance.

You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too



Strawberry

If, like me, you're one of those people who can't wait for the first strawberries of the year, you can use your polytunnel to get these delicious morsels three weeks earlier than anyone else. This is best done by using an early variety and planting it the previous summer, to give the root system time to develop.

Varieties: Honeoye, a vigorous and productive early variety with some botrytis resistance - vital in humid weather.



TOP TIP lots of compost and regular watering



delicious!





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

TOP OF THE CROPS

strawberry

harvest

growing

Dig plenty of compost into the strawberry bed in early summer, and keep it absolutely free of weeds until the strawberries are planted. Suppliers send young plants by post any time from September to March: make sure you ask for the earliest delivery slot you can get (which usually means ordering by telephone). Plants that have time to establish themselves before growth stops for the winter will bear fruit earlier, and more heavily, than spring-planted ones.

When the plants arrive, soak them in water for half an hour and then plant them so that the crown of the plant is just level with the surrounding soil, and water them in well. Keep them well watered (but never waterlogged) until they show fresh new growth from the crown. Once this happens they will need less water until the fruit starts to form (usually in late March), and won't need feeding at all in their first year because the bed was composted heavily.

As soon as the fruit begins to form, put straw beneath the plants to keep the berries up off the ground and to suppress weed growth. Tunnel-grown plants produce lots of runners (strong, self-rooting stems) and these need to be removed throughout the growing season to stop the bed from becoming crowded (which promotes fungal diseases).

If you want to keep the plants for a second year (or even a third) then remove the straw once fruiting has finished, cut the plants down to 5cm high, and then proceed as normal. The only difference to first-year plants is that you will need to feed them with a general purpose organic fertiliser in the early spring, and again with tomato feed when the first flowers appear. Don't keep the plants for more than three years.



REMEMBER

1

YEAR 1
plenty of compost

2

YEAR 2
bigger, better crops...

3

YEAR 3
last season,
time to start again



strawberry

growing

Diseases and pests: Slugs are best dealt with on a tunnel-wide basis by controlling habitat and removing them by hand on humid evenings when they are most active; if things get out of hand and you want to use pellets, only use organic ones which are based on ferrous phosphate and will not harm the soil.

Moulds are a constant companion of the strawberry bed, especially in damp, cloudy conditions. They're best prevented by making sure that the bed never gets crowded and maintaining good ventilation, particularly in humid weather. Once mould arrives the spores spread quickly, so you need to check the berries on a daily basis and remove any affected fruit and dead or dying foliage.

Harvest: If your tunnel is visited by birds (and most are) you will need to protect the fruit by covering it with lightweight plastic netting, held off the plants with wire hoops or short lengths of bamboo. Make sure you choose a wide netting size (19mm or more) to let the bees pollinate the strawberry flowers.

When you pick the strawberries, pick the calyx (the green leafy bit at the top of the berry) too, and don't heap the fruit up in a tiny punnet. This will give you perfect, undamaged fruit that will keep well for a few days – provided it makes it to the kitchen!

Recipe: There are so many ways to enjoy this fruit from cheesecake and crumble to salads and smoothies. The hardest part is saving enough whilst picking to actually make something in the kitchen.

Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

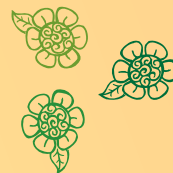
harvest



pests can eat the entire crop



easily five per day



Don't forget to check out the growing guide too



Potatoes

You can use your polytunnel to produce the earliest crop of potatoes you've ever seen. If you plant a 'first early' version in the middle of February, you should be able to harvest your first spuds from around the end of April, leaving the ground free in plenty of time for hot weather plants like cucumbers. And how welcome those first new potatoes are!

Varieties: 'Orla', 'Colleen'

Sowing: Make sure you get hold of your seed potatoes as early as possible, and certainly by the beginning of February. Put each one in the cell of an empty egg box with the cluster of 'eyes' at the top, and leave it in a well-lit frost-free place such as a cool windowsill. A couple of weeks of this treatment (known as 'chitting') will give the foliage a head start.

Dig plenty of compost or well-rotted manure into the ground where the potatoes are to be grown at the end of the previous season, and in February make trenches about 15cm deep and 40cm apart, with ridges 15cm tall between them. Place the seed potatoes, chits up, at 25cm intervals along the foot of the trench, 5-10cm below the surface.



spuds... tatties...
whatever you call them
they are delicious



jersey royals

maris piper

desiree

charlotte



king edward

pentland javelin

pink
fir
apple





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels

TOP OF THE CROPS



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

potatoes

harvest

growing

Once the plants are 10-12cm tall, pull the walls of the trenches in to cover all but the very tips of them. Earth them up like this a couple more times, until the trench has become a ridge with the potatoes growing out of the top of it, and keep the plants well watered.

Diseases and pests: Potatoes grown early in the tunnel escape the two biggest potato problems, slugs and blight, but frost can be a problem as the plants are not at all hardy. From the moment the sprouts first appear, have horticultural fleece ready to cover them if frost threatens.



Remember to keep your plants well watered



keep stock of horticultural fleece for the cold days





potatoes

growing

harvest

You can expect your first potatoes nine or ten weeks after planting, although in northern tunnels they may take a little longer. At this point carefully feel in the earth around the base of the plants, and if you find tubers that are big enough to take you can remove a few without disturbing the rest of the plant. Once they are of a good size, dig the whole plants up as you need them: take care to get all the tubers, or they'll sprout right in the middle of whatever you plant there next!

Recipe: With so many varieties of Potato, it's important you plant something that's going to be right for how you cook. Whether it's roasted, chipped, grated or sliced there are lots to choose from. Then you can sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labour.

Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

© Andy McKee 2011



ready to go...



mmmmm sunday roast

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too





FIRST TUNNELS
www.FirstTunnels.co.uk

growing

harvest

Peppers

Peppers, and most particularly sweet peppers, are a hugely underestimated plant for growing in the UK. This is largely because they don't do all that well outside, but in the polytunnel they're a whole different story. Vigorous and easy to grow, you can have fresh peppers from mid July to the end of November – and they freeze well too.

Varieties: (sweet peppers): 'Sunnybrook', 'Sweet Nardello'; (chilli peppers): 'Iranian Round', 'Early Jalapeño'. Read the seed merchant's description carefully, or you may – as I once did – accidentally grow several kilos of very hot chillis!

Sowing: For a good harvest you need to start peppers off in modules indoors in February, ideally at 20-25°C. Sow the seeds thinly 0.5-1cm deep and put them in a propagator or cover them with a clear plastic bag, and keep them in the warm until the seedlings appear in a week or so.

Once white roots appear at the bottom of the module, replant them in fairly small pots (8cm or so), burying almost all the stem in the compost as you would for tomato plants. You'll need to 'pot up' the seedlings like this several times rather than just moving them from the module to a large pot. This may seem like a lot of work but it encourages the plants to form stronger root systems, which means more fruits.



peppers need potting up



ALWAYS read the packet
make sure you grow the
right strength for you!





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels

TOP OF THE CROPS



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

peppers

harvest

growing

When the weather has warmed up properly (usually May) move the plants out to their final positions in the tunnel. This can be in the soil beds (40cm apart in a rich, well-drained location) or into 5-litre pots. I mention pots because doing this makes hardly any difference to the size of the harvest, and the plants are compact enough to be moved around when you need the space for something else – handy when the tunnel is chock full in the summer, as mine tends to be! The only drawback to doing this is that they're harder work to water, and dry out fast.

If the plants get a bit leggy it's a good idea to support them with plant sticks or short pieces of bamboo, because the stems are typically not as strong as they look. Once the first flowers appear the plants will benefit from a feed with tomato fertilizer every couple of weeks for the rest of the season.



peppers need support
even inside your tunnel



as the flowers appear
feed your plants
with tomato fertilizer
every couple of weeks





FIRST TUNNELS
www.FirstTunnels.co.uk



peppers

growing

Diseases and pests: Young seedlings can be attacked by slugs. Pot-grown plants can usually be kept in a slug-free location until the growth has toughened up a bit, but plants in the soil beds may need to be protected with copper rings for a few weeks. Peppers can also be prone to aphids and whitefly at any time in their lives: it pays to check the plants over every week or so (which is true of many tunnel plants) and if you find any nasties, squirt them off with water from a hand sprayer. Provided you deal with any infestation promptly, this is probably the only action you'll need to take.

Harvest: For both hot peppers and sweet ones, the fruits start off green. Some varieties (but not all) colour up as they ripen, turning red, yellow, orange or purple. You don't have to wait for the fruit to ripen, but ripening makes sweet peppers get sweeter and hot peppers get hotter. Any fruit that you don't collect can safely be left on the plant until the frosts approach and should then be brought indoors for drying or chopping and freezing. **Wear gloves when you handle chilli peppers!**

Recipe: There's a pepper recipe for everyone. From sweet, light summer salads to fiery chilli and extreme curries. Peppers add great texture and taste.

Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

harvest



Don't forget to check out the growing guide too





FIRST TUNNELS
www.FirstTunnels.co.uk

growing

harvest

Peas

Peas are a perfect example of how you can use your polytunnel to pull forward the start of summer by getting a harvest of sweet, tender peas three or four weeks before you could outside. A great boasting crop for showing off to the neighbours!

Varieties: Oskar, Douce Provence. Oskar is less hardy, so have some horticultural fleece ready for any late frosts, but it will give you sweet peas a week or so ahead of its nearest rivals. It's also very dwarfing, so you don't need to worry so much about what it will shade out.

Sowing: Dig some good compost into the spot where the peas are to be planted in late autumn or early winter. In February or early March, sow the peas 5cm deep in root-trainers or deep biodegradable pots, and keep them on a sunny windowsill: when their roots show at the bottom of the pots, it's time to plant them in the tunnel.



sweet...juicy peas



green with envy...
growing peas in your tunnel
will give you a crop weeks before
any other outdoor crop





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

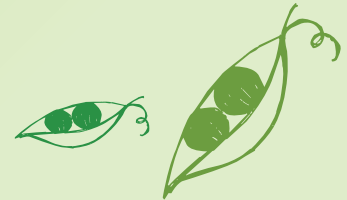
peas

harvest

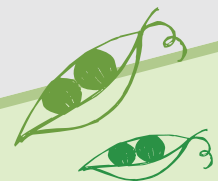
growing

Push pea sticks between the plants to support them, and tie them to it at intervals in case a late cold snap makes them go limp: when temperatures rise again they'll soon recover. Dwarfing peas like Oskar need less support; I usually just bend offcuts of chicken wire into a shallow U shape and place them over the row right after planting, and the plants grow up through them. If a hard frost is forecast, covering the row with fleece before dark the previous day will help them shrug it off.

Diseases and pests: The most common problems for young pea plants are slugs and aphids, but early tunnel plantings are usually growing strongly before either of these become a problem. Mice sometimes dig plants up looking for what's left of the seeds, but if you make sure that your tunnel isn't used for storage this is less likely.



peas need support





FIRST TUNNELS
www.FirstTunnels.co.uk



peas

growing

harvest

Pods are ready to pick as soon as you can feel the peas inside them, and checking them for perfect ripeness is a great excuse to eat a few raw in the tunnel. Once picked they begin to lose their sweetness within a few hours, so don't collect them until just before they're needed: look carefully up and down the row to make sure that you don't miss any, because this makes the plant stop flowering – which means no more peas!

Recipe: Another incredibly versatile crop, peas are a fantastic ingredient, accompaniment or even eaten raw straight from the plant.



PICK TIP
feel the pods for peas inside



Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too



Onions

Onions have been an important part of our diet since the Bronze Age, and after ripening (also known as 'curing') are hung for storage through the cold winter months. However, by the end of the spring, onions in store have usually started to sprout or rot, leaving a gap of several months before the first of the new harvest are ready.

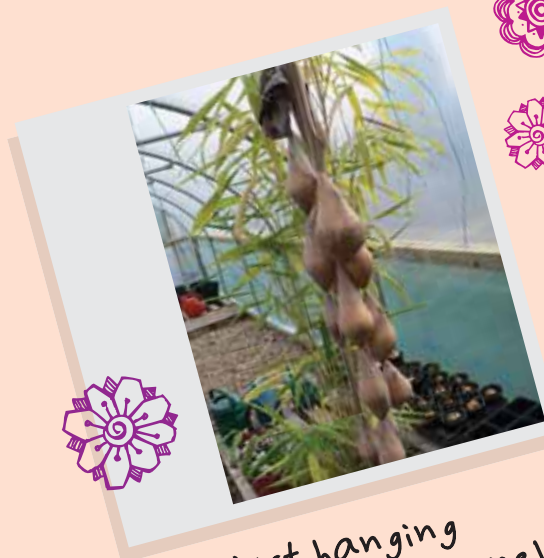
Early overwintering onions (sometimes called 'Japanese onions') were developed to shrink this gap, but they still don't ripen until July and winter losses can be high. In the polytunnel, however, overwintering onions really come into their own, giving bigger and better bulbs.

Varieties: 'Senshyu Yellow', 'Electric' (Red)

Sowing: For the most reliable results, buy onion sets rather than seed. Prepare the ground in May by gently forking plenty of compost or manure into the top layer of the soil: it should have settled nicely by the time you come to plant the sets, in July or August. Plant them with the tops just showing, in rows 10cm apart for easy weeding. If you're planning on eating the bulbs early to fill the 'onion gap' set them at spacings of 5cm within the row, but if you're going to leave them a bit longer and want bigger bulbs, then increase that to 10cm.



high and dry...
crops bars are great
for suspending trays
and drying onions



or just hanging
them in your tunnel
also works well





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

onions

harvest

growing

Just keep the onion bed free from weeds and well watered. On lighter soils, mulching round the bulbs with compost can help the bed stay moist during hot weather.

Diseases and pests: Newly planted sets sometimes succumb to moulds and mildew, so remove any that seem to be struggling. The emerging leaves are often attacked by slugs. Once the plants are growing strongly this won't bother them, but for the first few weeks you will need to check the onion bed with a torch, about an hour after dark, on any humid evenings. If you can see slugs and snails about outside, you can guarantee that the ones in the tunnel will be munching on your onions!

Onions are a low maintenance crop...



...just keep well weeded and watered



onions

growing

harvest

Onions need to ripen before use, otherwise the flavour can be quite harsh. You can tell when the bulbs are ripening because the leaves turn yellow and fall over, but if you need to harvest them earlier than this, you can cheat; fold the leaves over firmly at the neck, partly lift the bulbs out of the ground with a fork, and reduce the amount of water that you give. After a week or two like this they're ready to cook with, but if you plan on storing them for a while then move them to a sunny spot with good air circulation (I use a suspended shelf in my tunnel) and leave them for a further two or three weeks, until the necks have dried out completely. Then you can braid them for storage if you like, or pop them into net bags for hanging up somewhere cool and dry.

Recipe: Where to start? Onions are an extremely flexible ingredient that have masses of uses. You'll always find a way to use your onions.



dry for 1 to 2 weeks before using



Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too





FREE
DOWNLOAD



FIRST TUNNELS
www.FirstTunnels.co.uk

growing

harvest

Lettuce

Using the right varieties and a bit of protection you can harvest top-quality lettuce from your polytunnel all year round. I tend to eat salad more in the winter than I do in the summer, spicing up the lettuce with plants like rocket and mustard.

Varieties: 'Paris Island', 'Rouge d'Hiver', 'Webbs'

Sowing: Sow lettuce seeds thinly onto the surface of seed compost in modules or small pots and barely cover them with compost. Using a propagator you can do this at any time of the year, but it is best to avoid November to January unless your tunnel gets a lot of light, or unless you can spare some space on a bright windowsill. Lettuce plants don't tolerate dryness so keep the modules nicely damp: in the summer it is best to sow the seeds deeper – perhaps as much as 1cm. Once the seedlings have a couple of pairs of true leaves, plant them out into the soil beds.

Beyond protection from slugs, regular picking and enough water to stop them drying out, lettuces need very little attention. Less hardy varieties may need protection from late frosts in spring.



salad days...





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels

TOP OF THE CROPS



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

lettuce

harvest

growing

Slugs are the biggest nuisance when you grow lettuces, and the best strategy is to keep their numbers down throughout the year by constantly removing debris, minimizing low, crowded growth, and removing them by hand on humid evenings. When you grow lettuces, try to keep the area around them open and clear, and if necessary protect the young plants with copper rings.

Some varieties of lettuce are also attractive to greenfly: at the first sign of trouble squirt them off with water from a hand sprayer.

TOP TIP
don't crowd your crops
lettuce need space



TOP TIP
if you're worried about
slugs eating your crops
a copper ring will help
protect them



FIRST TUNNELS

www.FirstTunnels.co.uk



lettuce

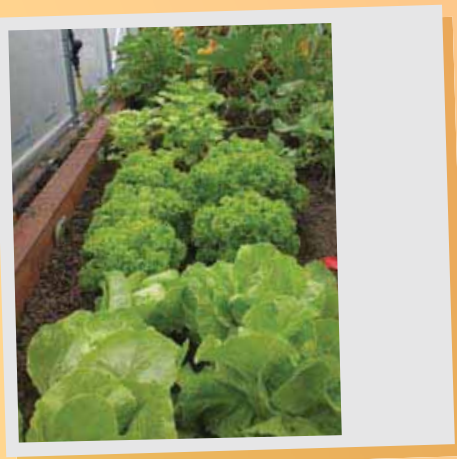
growing

harvest

For the best yields from your lettuce beds, choose loose-leafed varieties and pick the outer leaves constantly to leave a crown of at least four young leaves untouched. This means you will be harvesting from several plants at a time, but is much more efficient than waiting for whole 'heads' which are tremendously attractive to slugs. 'Pick and come again' harvesting (pick, don't cut) means that you will probably only need to make three or four sowings per year – perfect for the lazy gardener!

Recipe: Lettuce is a main stay of so many salads and also works well for soups.

TOP TIP
remember to use the 'pick and come again' harvesting method keeping at least four young leaves per plant



Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too



© [Andy McKee 2011](#)

Cucumber

Although there are varieties that can be grown outside in Britain, cucumbers do much better if grown under cover. Your polytunnel will allow you to grow the sprawling plants vertically up a cane or string, and you'll be surprised at just how many you will get – and for how long. For my own family of four, two plants gives us enough at the beginning and end of the season, and way too many in the middle. Recipe book on standby!

Varieties: 'Cumlaude' (F1), 'Burpless Tasty Green' (F1), 'Tamra'. There's a terrific choice though – in future years you might like to try pickling varieties like Crystal Lemon too.

Sowing: Prepare the soil by forking in a generous amount of manure or fresh compost in early spring. Remember these are going to be tall plants, so think about the shade they will cast. Cucumber seeds are expensive and don't germinate well without heat, so sow them singly 1cm deep into biodegradable pots of seed compost a couple of weeks before the last frost date for your area; you can look this up online. www.metcheck.com/V40/UK/FREE/frostrisk.asp Water the compost well, then cover the pots with cling film and put them on a warm windowsill during the day, and move it to the airing cupboard at night. A heated propagator is better if you have one, as it keeps conditions ideal without the fuss of moving the pots about.

Once the seeds are up put them in a light, warm place but do not allow the pots to dry out. As soon as daytime temperatures in the tunnel reach 21°C move the seedlings out to a bright area of tunnel staging for a few days, covering with [fleece](#) at night, to harden off.



up, up and away...



perfect for pickling





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels

TOP CROPS

OF THE



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

cucumbers

harvest

growing

Cucumbers are very susceptible to cold damage, so don't plant them out until the weather has warmed up. When planting the seedlings, mound the soil up by 3-5cm and then gently plant a seedling into the mound, biodegradable pot and all. Mounding the soil up like this helps prevent moulds and mildew attacking the base of the stem. Water around the plants to settle the soil, and protect them with a copper ring for a few weeks if slugs are a problem. Have some horticultural fleece ready to protect the plants if the temperature drops below 10°C; if they are damaged by an unexpected frost it is usually better to start again, as frost-stunted plants never fruit well.

As the plants grow give them an organic liquid feed once a week (or every other watering if you have badly drained soil) until they reach a height of roughly 30cm, and twice a week thereafter. Cucumbers are thirsty plants, so will always need a little extra when you water.

Cucumbers are traditionally grown up a trellis with side-shoots tied out horizontally to let them get as much air and light as possible, but you don't need to go to so much trouble to get good results. You can grow them perfectly well up a length of strong twine tied to a crop bar or clamp: wrap the stem around it as it grows, tying it on with loose loops of twine at intervals.

As the plants grow they will produce fruiting side-shoots, which can be thinned out as much as you need to to prevent the growth getting too crowded; nip out the growing tips of any shoots you want to restrict, just after the fifth leaf. When the plant reaches the top of its support, nip out the growing tip.

TOP TIP
cucumber like to climb
so use twine suspended
from a crop bar



TOP TIP
nip side shoots after
the fifth leaf to
keep the plants
managable





cucumber

growing

harvest

Diseases and pests: Keep an eye out for aphids and spray them off as soon as you see them. Although they are seldom a problem on cucumbers they can introduce cucumber mosaic virus, which will stunt or even kill the plant. Cucumbers can also be affected by mildew, verticillium wilt and red mites.

Harvest: Leaving cucumbers on the vine for too long reduces the total yield, so once fruiting starts have a good look through the foliage every few days to make sure you don't miss any. When fruiting peaks (in August) you'll need a strategy for dealing with the glut. Cook with them, pickle them, give them away...or cut them young to avoid drowning in the things!

Recipe: Cucumbers are a huge part of many salad and soup recipes. But are probably pickled, pureed and preserved more than any other vegetable. Plus a slice or two of fresh cucumber in Pimms is the perfect summer drink!



salads and soups



cool as a cucumber

Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too



Carrots

Growing carrots in the polytunnel is a year-round affair. Unless you miss a sowing, it's so easy to produce baby carrots all year round that you quickly come to view them as a completely different vegetable to the big maincrop carrots you grow outside – indeed some people stop growing outdoor carrots altogether. You don't need much space for carrots either: a 30cm row per adult each time you sow is plenty.

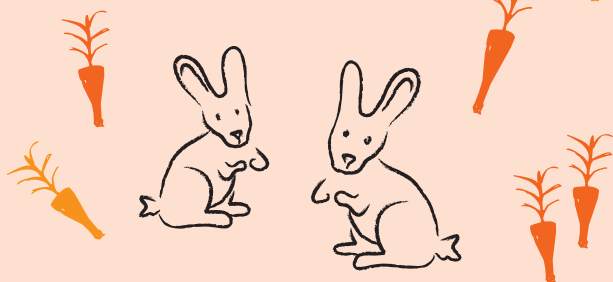
Varieties: Nantes 2 is a sweet 'second early' variety that gives baby carrots quickly, but won't become woody if you accidentally leave some to mature (and you will).

Sowing: No feeding of the soil is necessary, but it's a good idea to dig the soil to a depth of 15cm to break up any lumps or compaction, then water it down well. Very heavy soils may need some leafmould or sand to break them up. Sow the carrot seeds very thinly in drills 1.5-2cm deep and 20cm apart, and water them. Use a watering can with a fine rose to avoid washing the tiny seeds away.

Unless the weather is cool, then I like to cover the bed with a sack or double thickness of fleece; this improves germination by helping to keep the soil moist until the first seedlings appear (which may take up to three weeks). As soon as the seedlings have their first true leaves, thin them to 5cm and make your next sowing. Keep this routine going from February to the end of August, when you should make one last larger sowing to see you through the winter. I don't usually thin this last sowing, but carefully pull the larger roots first, leaving the others to stand a little longer.



all lined up,
ready to grow



the rabbits will have to get their fix elsewhere, your polytunnel should prevent them having their midnight feasts...



keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

carrots

harvest

growing

Carrots do not need feeding provided you don't plant them in the same spot year after year: the only attention they need is regular watering, and perhaps a light dressing of compost if the tops of the roots begin to turn green.

Diseases and pests: The biggest scourge of carrots is carrot root fly, which is hardly ever a problem in polytunnels. Slugs will attack the seedlings if other food is scarce, but once the plants are growing strongly they are rarely a problem.

Carrots are
a real low
maintenance
crop...



...you can even get
away with NOT
rotating the crop



carrots

growing

harvest

Gently remove the soil around the top of one or two roots with your fingers to see if the roots are big enough to begin harvesting. When they are, water the bed to make the roots easy to remove and pop out as many of the larger ones as you need, leaving the smaller ones to grow for a little longer. Twist the leaves off the carrots as soon as they are out of the ground so that they don't lose moisture through the foliage. Baby carrots don't usually need to be peeled – just wash them well and you're ready to go.

Recipe: Carrots are so versatile, depending whether you want a savoury or sweet dish, here are some ideas...

Savoury

soup, salad, coleslaw, bread, gratin, burgers, puree, pickled, roast

Sweet

carrot cake/muffins



Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too



Broadbeans

Broad beans are one of the first crops to break the monotony of the hungry gap, the period during which there is very little fresh produce coming from an outdoor plot. This prompts some gardeners to sow them in autumn to get an earlier harvest, but gales and hard winters can stunt or even kill them. They do far better in the shelter of the polytunnel, often producing three or four flowering stems per plant. There really is no excuse for empty space in your tunnel in winter!

Varieties: Aquadulce Longpod and Express.

Sowing: Two weeks before sowing, dig some fresh compost into the bed and water it well to settle the soil. In October (for the far north) to November (in the south), sow the beans at a depth of 3-5cm and water them in. Sow the beans 15cm apart with 20cm between rows. It's a good idea to sow a few extra in Roottrainers or deep biodegradable pots too, to replace any that don't come up.





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels

TOP OF THE CROPS



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

broadbeans

harvest

growing

Keep the bed well watered, but never let it become waterlogged. When the plants are still no more than 15cm tall, provide some support using pea sticks or short lengths of bamboo and twine. Drape horticultural fleece over the whole lot when extremely cold weather is expected. Nip the growing tips out soon after the appearance of the first pods, to make sure they fill out properly.

Diseases and pests: Mice will happily steal the beans during the first few weeks after sowing, so if rodents are a problem in your tunnel grow all your young plants in biodegradable pots, planting out when the roots start to push through the pots. If you have not sown many, you can protect individual plants by covering them with a cloche or the top half of a plastic drinks bottle.

Aphids (especially blackfly) find the growing tips of broad beans irresistible, although they may not appear early enough to catch your tunnel plants. Mild infestations can be sprayed off with a jet of water from a hand sprayer, but if things have gone too far the only option is to nip the tops out early. Try not to use pesticides in your polytunnel, because without rain to wash them away to the subsoil the chemicals stick around for a long, long time.



TOP TIP
support your plants
with bamboo or twine



TOP TIP
cover with horticultural
fleece when it's cold



broadbeans

growing

harvest

Harvest from May to June. For the best flavour, harvest the beans while they are still small. You can also pick them when the pods are no more than 7cm long and steam them whole, like mange-tout peas, for an even earlier crop.

Recipes: Broadbeans are a great ingredient that can be used in many dishes like...

- risotto
- salads
- pea and broadbean houmous
- soups
- broadbean mash



Broadbeans means lots and lots of cooking ideas.



Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance. You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too





FREE
DOWNLOAD



FIRST TUNNELS
www.FirstTunnels.co.uk

growing

harvest

Beetroot

With its sweet, earthy flavour and striking colour, beetroot is easy to grow outside in the summer. It also stores well, but the flavour deteriorates a bit. This is where the polytunnel comes into its own, because beetroot sown in late summer tolerates the cold well enough to stand through the coldest of weather, giving a harvest that stays absolutely fresh well into the spring. A brilliant crop for beginners!

Varieties: 'Detroit 2 Bolivar', 'Cylindra'

Sowing: Beetroot can be sown in the polytunnel any time the temperature is over 5°C, but will germinate much better around 25°C. If you're sowing when the weather is cold, use pots or large modules. Sow several seeds in each at a depth of 1cm, and thin them to the best plant once the seedlings emerge. In warmer weather you can sow directly into the soil, at one seed every 2cm in rows 15cm apart, then thin to roughly 10cms.



wow! what a colour...



always popular...
in salads...roasted
or just all over
your face...





keep up to date
with all that's happening, share hints,
tips and much more...
www.facebook.com/polytunnels



a section of the First Tunnels site
dedicated to video guides
for all aspects of your polytunnel
www.firsttunnels.co.uk

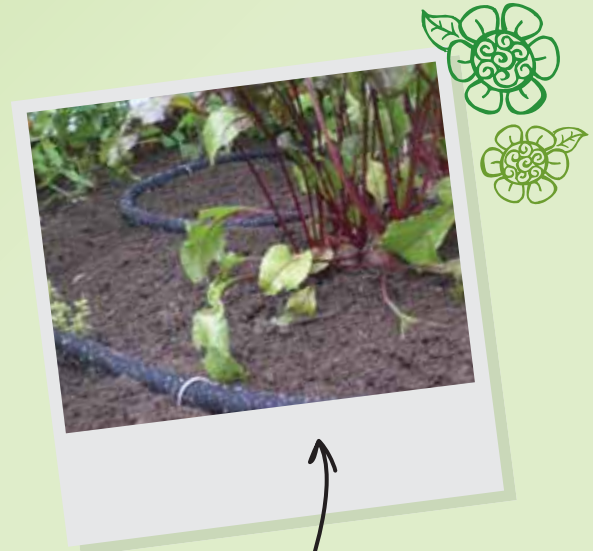
beetroot

harvest

growing

Once the seedlings are up, beetroot are slow to get started and don't like competition. Thin them out before growth gets crowded and keep the area free of weeds. Don't allow the bed to dry out, as this can make them run to seed.

Diseases and pests: Slugs are likely to be the biggest problem for young plants, so make sure that your tunnel is kept free of low, crowded growth (which encourages them) and consider protecting the plants until they are big enough to grow away from any damage.



TOP TIP

keep the plants thinned out and the beds moist

[Leaky pipe - more info](#)



FIRST TUNNELS
www.FirstTunnels.co.uk



beetroot

growing

harvest

For the very best flavour, beetroot should be lifted while they are still small: most varieties go woody if they are allowed to get too big.

Loosen the ground with a hand fork, lift the whole plant out, and twist the tops off immediately to stop the root from drying out. Don't forget that you can eat the leaves; treat them like chard.

Recipes: Beetroot is incredibly versatile, it can easily be used to make many things including...

risotto

salads

roast beetroot (with honey)

soups

chutney, relish and puree

beetroot slaw

even make chocolate and beetroot cakes!



Tuck in, time to enjoy your beets.



Visit www.FirstTunnels.co.uk for all your polytunnel products, spares, accessories and guidance.

You can find out about what we're currently doing via facebook, www.facebook.com/polytunnels and through our blog, www.polytunnelgardening.co.uk

Don't forget to check out the growing guide too



© [Andy McKee 2011](#)