

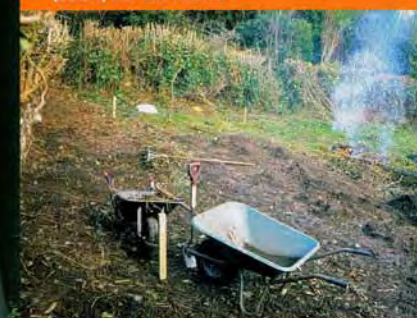
Tom's tunnel this summer and (facing page) some of the produce

Fantastic plastic

CHOOSING A POLYTUNNEL



Neglected raspberries and a large apple tree with horrible-tasting fruits and (below) the site cleared



Tom Barber decides it's time to stretch his resources to a polytunnel. But what size should he choose – and where should he position it?



I have had a small, '6 by 10' cedar greenhouse for many years and have grown accustomed to working within its limitations. This generally means endless juggling of seed trays, propagators and small pots early in the year, followed during the warmer months by four cucumbers and eight tomato plants, along with a few chillis and peppers, and then a smattering of salad plants through the winter. But it has been increasingly hard to ignore the siren call of the polytunnel, especially when everyone I know who has one waxes long and lyrical about just how fantastic they are and what massive harvests they now reap. The problem for me – apart from the obvious one of initial cost – has always been where to put it. Between the chickens and the kid's trampoline there really is no room at home, and at the allotment I've always been put off by the likelihood of vandalism and theft.

However, a new metal perimeter fence around the site – gulag style in appearance but undoubtedly effective – has made the allotment much more secure, so last winter I took the plunge and decided to go for it.

Why a polytunnel?

Essentially a polytunnel is a series of metal hoops joined by a ridge to form a rigid frame over which a plastic film is stretched and secured, leaving access doorways at each end. This simplicity of structure means you have a large protected growing area for relatively little cost, providing improved growing conditions for all sorts of crops.

Plants like tomatoes and sweetcorn that can do OK outside given a half-decent summer, will reliably produce heavier, better quality crops in a polytunnel and, if you've never seen a polytunnel-grown courgette plant, be prepared to be amazed at their size and vigour. In addition a polytunnel opens up new horizons with more tender plants like melons and aubergines, which need the extra warmth to prosper.

Even more importantly for our family, given our attempts to be as self-sufficient as possible in fruit and vegetables, is the opportunity a polytunnel creates for extending the season at both ends – achieving much earlier crops of

peas, beet, broad beans and the like. It will also significantly extend productivity at the end of the year.

Furthermore a polytunnel allows a much improved winter growing season, which for me will mean winter lettuces, a range of other salads, leaf beet and herbs, along with some autumn-planted early potatoes to enjoy around Christmas. One definite goal for us is to be able to pick a decent bag of salad every week of the year. A polytunnel is also a perfect place to escape rain and biting winds while doing a bit of gardening at the same time.

That's a lot of benefits, but it is just as important to be realistic about what a polytunnel isn't before you go to the trouble of installing one. They are not large greenhouses. The insulating properties of polythene are very poor compared to glass, so a polytunnel is difficult to keep warm and thus very expensive to heat. So if you're after a place to overwinter tender plants, you'll need that greenhouse. Neither could I claim that polytunnels are ideal for seed raising, mainly because compared to a greenhouse ventilation is

“ One goal for us is to pick a decent bag of salad every week of the year ”

limited, light transmission is significantly lower and it is harder to maintain a steady temperature.

Finally, let's not beat about the bush, polytunnels are ugly beasts, closer to giant over-inflated plastic bags than some of the more-attractive greenhouses on the market. A polytunnel is never going to be an aesthetically pleasing focal point in your garden.

Size and site

Still think a polytunnel's for you? Then the next question has to be how big you're going to go. In general, economies of scale dictate that the larger the polytunnel the cheaper it will work out per square metre of growing space. However, you obviously have to accommodate the thing and bigger means it will take more work to put up and look after.

Moreover there's no earthly point paying for covered space that's going to sit idle for weeks on end. You need to make the polytunnel space work for you.

Commercial polytunnels can be colossal multi-span structures, covering hectares of ground, but for the average domestic situation you're likely to be looking at something altogether more modest, say between 3 – 5.4m (10 – 18ft) wide and maybe 4.5 – 15m (15 – 50ft) long.

Site permitting, it makes sense to go for width rather than length. The sides of a tunnel are generally the least useful for growing because of restricted headroom and, in addition, if you're relying on the end doors for ventilation, it's easier to ventilate something wide and short than long and narrow.

After much measuring and head scratching I went for a 3.6m x 7.5m (12ft x 25ft). This was the largest I could feasibly get on my allotment and I reckoned it would provide plenty of treats for a family of five, plus some surplus for friends and neighbours. Think carefully where you're going to site your new tunnel. It is not something you can pick up and move somewhere else if you change your mind. Take into account that you will need a minimum 1m (3ft) free space on all four sides of the tunnel to allow enough work space to secure the polythene along the edges and also to carry out cleaning and repairs in the future.



In exposed areas, choose a tunnel with heftier hoops

Think ventilation, ventilation, ventilation – specially if the tunnel is long

Sunlight, slopes and shelter

After size, there are three further things to consider before you start preparing the site – sunlight, slope and shelter. A polytunnel should receive as much direct sun as possible, so don't put it under your mature copper beech. To maximise sunlight throughout the year the long axis should ideally run east to west. Having said that, it's not the end of the world if you can't achieve this – mine runs more like NE to SW and it doesn't seem to have caused any discernible problems.

I wish I could say the same about slope. A gentle, regular slope along the length of the polytunnel is fine, but a difference in level of more than a few centimetres from one hoop end to the other is another matter altogether. Unfortunately I only discovered this after reading the instructions that arrived with my tunnel.

When, after many hours of preparation including tree felling and strimming scrub, I finally came round to measuring up, I found my chosen site had a 60cm (2ft) fall across its width. It was far too late to turn back, so I had some heavy work to do to level things off – fixing timber retainers, then digging and barrowing in around 6 tonnes of soil as back-fill. So my advice is to check beforehand!

Finally, shelter – use it. Even if you don't look out one windy day to see your precious new polytunnel sailing across the garden like a giant plastic kite, in very exposed positions the polythene and even the framework, is more liable to suffer damage. You will also have to accept lower internal temperatures. Again, it's a case of using common sense – if you have a hill, don't put the polytunnel on the top but on the leeward side, and make the most of the shelter of buildings, hedges and trees.

Before I let you loose on those appealing brochures, there are two more factors to consider when choosing your site – access and services. A polytunnel will always require frequent visits (no polytunnel is a labour-saving device) especially at the height of summer, so near is better than far – another drawback of the allotment, I have to say.

Good paths are a big help on a wet day in winter. Watering is an absolute essential, so even if you don't fix up a tap supply inside the tunnel itself you're certainly going to need one close by. Electricity can be useful as well, particularly if you're planning to do much propagation or are partial to midnight gardening in your pyjamas.

Now that you know how big your polytunnel is going to be and exactly where it's going to sit, you're ready to move on to make a number of other significant decisions before you part with your money.

If you are a bit of a bean pole yourself look for models with greater headroom at the sides

Framework

The hoops, foundation tubes and ridge poles are invariably made from galvanised steel, but there is some variation in the diameter of the tubing and in how widely the hoops are spaced, generally related to the size of the finished structure. If you know your tunnel is going to have to cope with an exposed position it's wise to look for heftier tubing and closer hoop spacings – say every 1.5m (5ft) instead of every 2m (7ft).

The other major variable here is the profile of each hoop. Most domestic tunnels have hoops shaped as a regular arc but several on the market have an initial straighter section of 1m (39in) or so at each end. Though these are slightly more expensive they do give more headroom along the edges. This is valuable, especially in smaller tunnels, if you plan to have staging along one side or grow taller plants like tomatoes along the edges. The finished height of a tunnel will also vary depending on the span and profile of the hoops. If you're a bit of a bean pole yourself or are planning to grow a lot of climbers like vines and cucumbers, then you would be well advised to look for models with greater clearance.

Fixing system

Having stretched the polythene tight across the framework – one of the crucial junctures of the erection process, as you'll discover – it can be secured in two different ways. The standard and cheapest option, in terms of money if not effort, is to dig a deep trench around the outside of the frame and bury the loose edges of the polythene at the bottom as you refill. This also serves to anchor the whole tunnel to the ground.

The alternative is to buy ready-made timber side rails and fix the polythene to these. This approach saves a lot of huffing and puffing and you will be grateful all over again when the time comes to replace the cover. However, it is – you've guessed it – more expensive and also requires the use of base plates on the bottom of each hoop end which need to be concreted in to anchor the tunnel.



Don't skimp on the polythene

Ventilation

Your final big decision is doorways and ventilation. As the door openings are often the only means of ventilation, it pays to go for the widest on offer, and be warned – manufacturers often err on the small size. If at all possible have double doors at least at one end. Not only will this maximise ventilation, keeping the tunnel cooler in summer and your plants disease free, but it also allows easy access with a wheelbarrow when it comes to clearing away redundant plants or bringing in manure.

If you've gone for a large, and especially long, polytunnel it may well pay to think about additional ventilation. Several manufacturers offer the option of sides that can be raised to around half height in

summer with the openings covered with mesh. There are many other more minor polytunnel variables and optional extras, which you'll discover as soon as you start looking at the range available from the numerous manufacturers. Next month I'll take you through the trials and tribulations of erecting my own polytunnel. It was certainly not all plain sailing, but even after only half a summer's use I have absolutely no regrets. My tomatoes have been as big as footballs and as for the peppers, melons and cucumbers...but that's another story.

• Tom's polytunnel was supplied by **First Tunnels**, Dixon Street, Barrowford, Lancashire B89 8PL, tel 01282 601253 sales@firsttunnels.co.uk www.firsttunnels.co.uk