

Small-space Polytunnel



We don't all have space for an enormous polytunnel, so what can you do instead?
Paul Peacock looks at something new

IT LOOKS LIKE a prison for small children. I was visiting Sean at First Tunnels in Lancashire because of a complaint one of our readers sent in. This particular gentleman was a little cross because he didn't have room for a large polytunnel, and could we please do something on growing under cover in small gardens.

I had wondered at various designs for a small tunnel, or something different. In my mind's eye I wondered about putting all the poles from a polytunnel into a sort of jelly shape and then covering this with plastic to make an all but perfect geodesic dome. So I tried it and had the devil of a job getting the plastic taught because every time I pulled on one side it twisted out on the other.

Back to the drawing board! I then tried to cross the hoops to see if this would then allow me to make a circle

but this too was a disaster. I couldn't keep the poles in place. It seems that a polytunnel is a polytunnel, and that's that!

**YOU CAN LIFT
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PLANTS**

But I am experimenting with a tent, for which I have no pictures yet, which has the sides cut out and has plastic in place. The problem at the moment is that the glue isn't perfect, but it could be a good idea for a cheap covered growing space in a small garden which can be pulled down when not actually in use.

But, having said that, the perfect solution seems to be this mini tunnel from First Tunnels. It is built on a frame that easily bolts together and then the hoops hold the plastic in place. You can lift the plastic up and out of the way to gain access to your plants. One of the interesting ways it can be used is as a lid to a raised bed, making it possible to plant something like cabbage seed in the spring, and then

in June, lift the lid away and put it onto another bed with, say, melons growing.

From September you could work a bed up with plenty of manure and compost and plant potatoes for Christmas, and you could take advantage of those late September Indian summers by opening the tunnel plastic.

Heating a small tunnel like this might be a little tricky because of its size. You'd



No matter how I tried I couldn't make a different tunnel.

have to have a heater on its lowest setting, but that said I use a series of candles in tins which show no light, and therefore do not attract attention to themselves, but heat the space very well.

So if you have only a few feet and not a lot of money, have a look out for a micro polytunnel.

THE POLYTUNNEL IN EARLY SUMMER

It is remarkable how much the spring rains make the tunnel dirty, and before you go putting sunlight protection on the skin, give the whole thing a good wash first. You will find you waste less wash and the tunnel looks better for it. The interesting thing about all this dirt is that much of it has come from Africa, particularly the Sahara where desert storms put clouds of dust high into the atmosphere.

June is a month of hardening off and you should prepare for this in a number of ways. Open the doors during the day, being sure to close them again at night. We should be out of frost danger, but I do remember snow in June, so keep your eye on night-time temperatures.

If you have a sprinkler system, give it a good blast out so that the nozzles can be seen to work. There is nothing more annoying than to have a harsh jet of water on precious plants. Don't forget to replace faulty nozzles. Also, water in the morning and this will create the best growing atmosphere during the day. I must confess I am not one of the 'wet the path' brigade to bring up the humidity. I prefer to keep the compost moist and the rest of the tunnel dry to keep fungal infections at bay. Needless to say I don't have a nozzle system.

Now is the time to sow winter cabbages and other brassicas such as



broccoli, and Chinese leaves. You can also sow French beans for later in the season, as well as more peas – you can never have enough peas!

The soil should be warm enough in the polytunnel to use nematode worms to kill slugs, snails and vine weevils. You mix them with water that has had a chance to warm up in the tunnel and simply water them in through a rose. I have an old galvanised can just for the purpose.

As you know I am all for water saving, and water-butts are a great idea. I have a system where the outdoor rainwater is

fed via a pipe to one in the polytunnel, via about eight others. This means that the one indoors is warmer than the others and I water with this. Make sure the lids are fine and in place and remove any algal growths that appear in butts. It takes ages to remove them from the rose once it has clogged up.

Now is a good time to compartmentalise the plants if you need special conditions. Even in

a polytunnel with the doors open they can get quite cold and can benefit from draughtproofing. I like to protect my peppers in this way, just to make sure that early growth is not stunted. Even a judicious upturned lemonade bottle is not a bad idea.

It is also time to prune in the tunnel. Tomatoes need the side shoots constantly controlled. It is important

to look carefully because they grow so quickly and are easy to miss. Before you know it you have a side shoot as long as your leg and pulling this out can lead to infection. Best to remove them as they ▶

TOMATOES NEED THE SIDE SHOOTS CONSTANTLY CONTROLLED

▶ appear and are quite small. Aubergines and peppers can have their tips pinched out to be sure you get the fullest amount of fruit. Start feeding once a week; all of these plants do well on tomato feed.

Sweetcorn sown earlier in the spring can go outdoors now, but in the tunnel why not sow some more so that you can get a chance of a crop later in September. Plant them about 18in apart in such a way that if you have both doors open when they are flowering you can get good pollination. Remember this is a wind-pollinated plant, so plant in a grid.

FINALLY, WATCH OUT FOR WHITEFLY

Whitefly are a pain in the neck. They seem to get everywhere and because they are white (hence the name) they look like a cloud of locusts when you disturb any plant that is infested. They are about two millimetres long and pure white. They suck sap from the underside of



*Above: Healthy cabbage? Look under the leaves!
Below: Open the doors during the day.*

the leaves and you can easily miss them, but when you tap the plant, out they come!

They weaken the plant by taking sugar from the phloem tubules, but worse, the gooey honeydew that drops onto the leaves from the insect attracts fungal infections. The fact that they pierce the plants too infects them with viruses. This will weaken the plants even further.

Although whitefly will do well enough outside, in the tunnel they are virulent; the high temperatures acting as a spur to their reproductive organs and they divide very quickly. Within a month a single whitefly can fill the tunnel with its progeny, so you have to be on guard.

There are a number of organic whitefly killers available, and these really are the best to use rather than relying on the thumb and forefinger or the water spray. You never really seem to

get on top of them without a few heavy molecules to knock them on the head. ☹

