

Growing crops in polytunnels fact sheet

Throughout this fact sheet reference is made to resources from the Food for Life Partnership Food Growing Manual. This exciting manual was produced in support of the Food for Life Partnership by Garden Organic to provide practical growing advice and guidance. This resource is free to all schools enrolled on the Food for Life Partnership Mark Award and can also be accessed on the Garden Organic website www.gardenorganic.org.uk



Introduction

Polytunnels can be a valuable addition to the school garden, extending the growing season so that you can be harvesting crops for longer and increasing the variety of crops you can grow. This fact sheet focuses on using polytunnels as a sheltered and warmer place to grow more tender crops through the summer and to carry on growing through the winter.

It is best to grow crops in open ground in your polytunnels. The ground can then be improved year on year by adding bulky organic matter, see A9 to learn more. It will retain moisture longer and reduce the need to buy growbags and compost. If you don't have any bare ground at the moment you could consider taking up flagstones/paving to create beds or build raised beds.

If you need to grow in containers it is best to make your own potting mixes. See A38 for how to do this. Until you have built up a good supply of kitchen compost, leafmould, etc you may need to buy growing mediums; make sure growbags and composts are peat free. Remember when you have harvested your main summer crops like tomatoes there should still be enough goodness left in growbags to grow winter salads and other less hungry crops. Just cut the whole top off the grow bag to maximise growing space.

You may also wish to include a propagation bench in your polytunnels to raise healthy seedlings and to give you a good head start with young plants. See A57 for how to build your own.

Increasing the variety of crops you grow

Many people eat a reasonable amount of Mediterranean style food and these crops tend to need the additional protection of a polytunnel or greenhouse to flourish in a British climate.

Crop	Growing information
Tomatoes	Whilst you can grow tomatoes outside you will have a more reliable crop if you grow them under cover especially in the north. Choose varieties, which are recommended for growing under cover. Sow seeds early March in a heated propagator and transplant into final growing position end of April early May. Suitable varieties include Gardener's Delight for small cherry tomatoes and Harbinger for a classic tasty variety from 1910.
Cucumbers	Choose varieties suited to greenhouse cultivation. Sow seeds late March early April in a heated propagator and transplant into final growing position late May. Try Rocky FI for a mini cucumber or Cumlaude FI for a larger commercial variety.
Peppers	Sow seeds in February and March in a heated propagator and transplant into final growing position in May. Try Amarillo a very old South American variety with small orange fruit.
Aubergines	Sow seeds in March and April in a heated propagator and transplant into final growing position in May and June. Choose varieties that are quick to mature, eg Ivory Egg.
Melons	Melons are quite an ambitious crop to grow especially in cooler climates but it is fun to have a go; grow them on a mound as they don't like wet feet. Sow seeds in April and May in a heated propagator and transplant into final growing position in June. Try Sweetheart FI, which is early to ripen, and one of the easier varieties to grow.

Crops to overwinter in your polytunnel

Winter is classically a time for root vegetables but you can supplement your winter harvest with some of the ideas below, often by sowing straight after harvesting your final summer crops such as tomatoes and cucumbers. You could raise young plants in modules so they get a head start and plant out when space becomes available. You may need to cover them with horticultural fleece too if the weather is particularly cold.

Crop	Growing information
Winter salad	These tend to be hearting lettuces although some are suitable for cutting individual leaves. Suitable varieties include Valdor, which is considered the world's best and biggest winter lettuce, Winter Density is another popular hearting lettuce. Sow in September and harvest November through to March.
Spinach	Sow in September to overwinter, pick young leaves for salads. Suitable varieties include Giant Winter and Palco FI.
Spring onions	Choose winter varieties such as White Lisbon or Winter Hardy and sow directly into the soil after you harvest your summer crops either just before the summer holidays or in the autumn term through to October.
Oriental greens and Oriental mustards	These often-spicy leaves can be harvested individually and are good for winter salads. Suitable varieties include Green in Snow or Indian Mustard Greens – sow one side of the summer holidays or the other - July to September. Harvest through the winter months.
Radish	Autumn and winter varieties are often long and thin and can be used in cooking as well as in salads. Suitable varieties include Rosa, Minowase and China Rose. Sow before the summer holidays in July – keep watered through the summer holidays and harvest on return to school.

Health & safety	Warn pupils and adults that polytunnels can reach high temperatures very quickly. Open doors and ventilated side walls if necessary. Monitor each other and report anyone feeling unwell immediately. Everyone should take regular breaks outside and keep hydrated by drinking water.
Further information	<p>Food for Life Partnership Food Growing Manual</p> <p>Activities on DVD:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A9 Testing soil and improving fertility A45 Assessing greenhouses and polytunnels A57 Building a heated propagator <p>Food Growing Instruction Cards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> S4.9 Using greenhouses and polytunnels S4.10 Using watering systems