



Top Tips For Growing Under Cover

Whether you're growing vegetables or flowering plants you can get them off to a flying start by sowing the seeds under cover. There are lots of different options with a range of prices and space requirements – pick one that suits you.

1. The Window Sill – hopefully we've all got a few of these, but for seeds to germinate and grow successfully they need to have some sunlight and not be too hot (i.e. above a radiator). The best growing window sills are in bright, cool rooms – porches and conservatories are ideal. Once your seedlings have germinated remember to turn round the pots or trays everyday so the seedlings don't all bend one way towards to light. Keep the compost moist at all times – but don't over-water as this encourages green algae.

2. Indoor mini-greenhouses – by adding a clear plastic or glass cover over your trays or pots you'll create extra heat to help your seeds germinate. Once your seedlings have started growing remove the cover so that the air can circulate and the seedlings can grow unrestricted.

3. Outdoor cloches – a fancy name, but these are just moveable clear plastic or glass covers that will warm the soil beneath them and protect seedlings and small plants from frost and cold winds. You can buy rigid plastic or glass cloches, or put in curved hoops and stretch plastic film across them or save large plastic drinks bottles and cut off the bottoms and use them as individual plant cloches. Just make sure you allow some air circulation inside the cloche.



4. Lean-to Plastic Greenhouse – these are widely available at low prices, can fit into small areas and make use of vertical space. They will do the job of protecting your seedlings and plants, but make sure that they are well anchored down as they are light and easily blown over. Ideally you should put them against a south or west facing wall or balcony where there is plenty of sunlight. As with cloches you need to allow air circulation inside the greenhouses; so unzip/open them during the day and close them at night. Otherwise fungus can establish quickly and kill your seedlings/plants. Check the pots and trays regularly and ensure they are moist, but not waterlogged.

5. Cold Frame – these need horizontal space and only take one layer of pots or trays. The lids should be opened during warm days and closed at night. They can be used during the winter to provide protection for hardy seedlings or in the spring to help 'harden-off' tender plants, that have been grown in the greenhouse or polytunnel, before they are planted into the garden.

6. Greenhouse – these need a flat, level area that is open to the sun (but avoid a south-facing area with no shade as it will be too hot in the late Spring/Summer). Allow at least a metre clear around the greenhouse so you can clean it and replace glass panes. To allow air circulation include at least two sets of windows/vents as well as the door. Clean them out with a disinfectant each winter to avoid a build-up of pests and diseases. Citrox is a good natural disinfectant that will not damage plants.

Unheated greenhouses will still provide a head start for seedlings from February onwards. To insulate during cold winters put bubble wrap inside the glass or cover trays and pots with horticultural fleece. Avoid over watering in the winter and spring when seedlings need only small amounts of water.

7. Polytunnel – if you have plenty of space these are a great option and provide plenty of space for growing vegetables. If you have an exposed site they will shelter plants and extend the growing season considerably. As with greenhouses, you need a reasonably level site and room around it for maintenance.

The plastic film should be cleaned annually and consider installing an irrigation system in a large polytunnel – porous pipe is an effective and reasonably priced option.

