

## MAKE A CLOCHE TUNNEL

There's something really satisfying about making your own cloche tunnel. They don't take long to make and will give you so much versatility in what you grow. You can make the hoops or frame from wood or metal, but plastic is easiest and kinder to the cover material that will go on top. Alkathene piping, about 1.5cm (0.5in) in diameter, is flexible yet sturdy and should last for many seasons. A central support connecting the hoops along the top gives extra strength against the inevitable winter winds.

Secure the hoops to the ground by pushing them on to lengths of rebar that have been hammered firmly into position. You can also attach hoops to an existing raised bed, so creating slots for the hoops to feed into. Short lengths of piping one or two sizes up from the hoops and secured to the walls with screws or metal straps should give a firm anchorage.

Strong, clear polythene is the best cover, though horticultural fleece also works well. It will need to be properly secured against the wind. Keep the ends up and open on mild days then batten down the hatches once it turns much colder. Open up the ends whenever you can so that fresh air can circulate.

Any of these homespun options will of course save you money while bringing home the winter produce. Try it, and treat yourself to more off-season freshness – you deserve it!

## KEEPING OUT THE WIND

Tunnel cloches that are covered with fleece or polythene will need to be properly secured against

the wind. It's frustrating to wake up after a storm to find your cover splayed against the fence or,

worse still, caught up in a neighbour's tree! Here are a few options to secure your cover firmly into place.

**STONES:** Use large, smooth stones or bricks at regular intervals along the edge of the cover. If your garden is particularly windy space the stones closer.



**SOIL:** The simplest option is to bury the sides of the cover into the soil, or to pile soil on in mounds. This takes more effort but is a very effective way to keep covers from getting airborne.



**STAPLES:** Buy purpose-sold staples to pierce and hold down your cover. Or make your own by cutting sections of old wire coat hangers to bend into u-shaped pins.



**CANES/BOARDS:** If the ground is level you can weight down the edges with a heavy board. Or wrap the edge of the cover around a bamboo cane, which can then be secured to the ground with tent pegs.



Picture: Oregon State University

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A simple but every-  
bit-as-effective cloche  
made from wooden  
battens and polythene



Picture: telex4

# WINTER WARMERS

The autumn equinox is upon us, which means longer nights and shorter days. And with the accompanying cooler weather, now is the moment growth really starts to slow. Yet there's still time to cheat the seasons – just a little at least! How? By making your own crop covers, as Benedict Vanheems demonstrates

**A**utumn's always been a bit of a funny one; all that death and decay, shedding of leaves and cooler, rainier weather. On the face of it there isn't much to be cheerful about.

But autumn is a beautiful time of year too. Who doesn't love those cool, crisp, nip-to-the-nose October mornings? Or the ethereal shafts of light that pierce through the ever-thinning tree canopies? Then there's all those glorious autumnal colours – oh, and the fruits, nuts and seeds that mark the end of another successful year.

It won't be long before we're putting the bulk of the kitchen garden to bed. On goes its winter cap of organic matter – or perhaps you sowed an overwintering green manure? There'll be summer crops to be cleared, supports to be taken down for storing, and lots – and lots – of leaves to be raked up and composted.

It's easy to resign the growing season to its conclusion, but with a few crop covers there is still the opportunity to delay its inevitable end for just a while longer. With a little shelter from the worst of the weather you can eke out a few additional weeks from long-standing staples such as chard and end-of-season salads. Some of the hardiest staples such as kale may even push through new leaves for cutting during one of the unseasonal warm spells that are becoming increasingly familiar. And then, by the end of February or March, there's the heady prospect of sowing a couple of weeks earlier to gain a precious head start on unprotected sowings.

## PROTECT AND SERVE

Crop covers such as miniature polytunnels, cloches and cold frames protect the plants growing within them by trapping the sun's precious rays to raise the temperature a few degrees above the outside air temperature. The difference is subtle, but it makes all the difference and serves to turn an unproductive time of year into a productive one.

Cold frames are very easy to construct. Essentially a box with a see-through lid on, its walls can be carefully crafted from pressure-treated timber, or simply cobbled together using breeze blocks, bricks or even straw bales. Start with the

“Miniature polytunnels, or tunnel cloches, are very simple to set up”



## FROSTY OUTLOOK

Correctly timing your winter-hardy vegetables is crucial to ensuring a usable harvest over the coldest months. Plants ideally need to be at or very close to maturity before the first frosts arrive, when the growing season officially ends. Plan ahead by following these simple steps.

- 1) Find out the typical first frost date for your area. You can look this up online, for example: [www.gardenaction.co.uk/main/weather1.asp](http://www.gardenaction.co.uk/main/weather1.asp)
- 2) Select cold-tolerant varieties and find out how long it takes them to reach maturity – this information should be on the seed packet. Add another couple of weeks to this time to allow for reduced light levels and cooler temperatures later on in the growing season.
- 3) Work backwards from the first frost date and sow accordingly. Run out of time? Then get hold of some ready-to-go plug plants to jump-start your chances of success.



See over the page for tips on making this simple tunnel cloche

## RAID THE RECYCLING

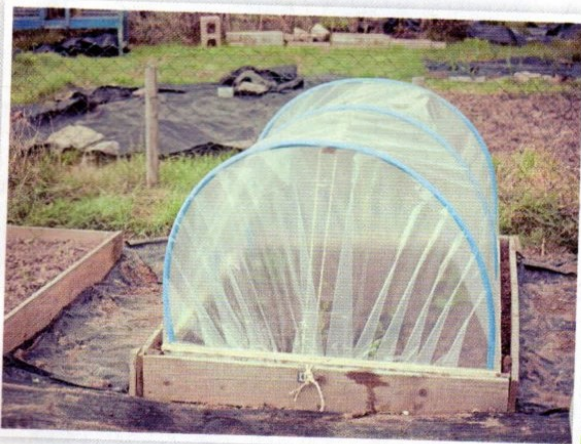
The simplest and most immediate crop covers are those made from plastics raided from the recycling bin. Plant-sized cloches are a doddle to make from the likes of four-pint milk bottles or two-litre clear plastic water bottles. Don't forget to slip or peel off the label before using them so that as much light as possible can pass through. Slip them over individual plants of winter salads such as lamb's lettuce, corn salad, winter lettuce and mustard.

You can cut bottles in half to make two relatively squat cloches. If you can get hold of lots of bottles then all the better; this means you can cut off only the very bottom, leaving plenty of height. Taller cloches give a greater volume of warmed air around each plant, so temperature fluctuations aren't as severe. Leave the screw caps off so that air can circulate and reduce the risk of moulds and other damp-loving fungi taking hold. You can always twizzle the caps back on if a particularly cold spell threatens.

As well as protecting winter salads, bottle cloches are great for coaxing clumps of herbs, such as chives, into early growth at the end of winter. Or use them to shield young transplants from the worst of the weather, gradually acclimatising them by propping up one side of the bottle before finally removing it.

Bottles and clear plastic salad containers (with holes poked into the bottom for ventilation) are very versatile. But they are very light too – no match for a November storm or a gusty January evening! Stop them from blowing straight off by pushing them firmly into the ground – at least an inch and preferably two deep. Larger bottle cloches can be further anchored into place by pushing an offcut of bamboo cane in through the top and into the ground.

Bubble wrap, whether left over from a delivery or bought in especially, is hugely valuable in the garden. Wrap it around a homemade wire cage or over upturned wire hanging basket frames to create a temporary snug blanket on particularly cold nights. Longer pieces of bubble wrap are ideal for wrapping around pots whose occupants need their roots protecting from extreme cold. ➤



lid – an old window or salvaged shower door for example – then set the dimensions of your walls accordingly. The lids can be attached using second-hand hinges or simply rested on top. Slant the lids towards the midday sun for light penetration.

Miniature polytunnels, or tunnel cloches, are very simple to set up, allowing you to cover a sizeable area of ground for very little investment in time and money (see step-by-step project). Cover them with a thick, heavy-duty clear polythene cover, available in a universe of lengths and widths from many online suppliers. You could also use thick, heavyweight horticultural fleece. In both cases, pin down the cover at soil level at regular intervals to create a proper 'seal' between the internal and external environments. Suspending the covers on hoops above the ground ensures steadier conditions and will stop leaves touching the cover and getting cold-damaged.



Clear plastic bottles make excellent miniature cloches for individual plants



## STEP BY STEP HOW TO MAKE A TUNNEL CLOCHE

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Coil of 12mm (0.5in)-diameter alkathene pipe
- Lengths of rebar at least 30cm (12in) long
- Cable ties
- Strong, clear polythene to fit
- Pipe insulation or similar soft material
- Spring clamps or pegs
- Hacksaw

**STEP 1.** Home-made tunnel cloches almost universally start with alkathene piping like this. It comes as a coil from any DIY store or builders' merchants and will provide numerous sturdy hoops at a very reasonable cost.

**STEP 2.** Start by hammering in the lengths of rebar at equal intervals along the edge of the bed. Space them about 90cm (3ft) apart on both sides. About 15cm (6in) of rebar should be left above ground.

**STEP 3.** Use a hacksaw to cut the alkathene piping into sections to create your hoops. The hoops should leave enough headroom for taller plants such as kale. Cut all the hoops to exactly the same length.

**STEP 4.** Push the hoops down on to the rebar uprights. With all the hoops pushed into place you now have the basic framework of your tunnel cloche.

**STEP 5.** For stability add a central support along the ridgeline of the hoops. This can be a wooden batten that's then screwed on to each hoop. Or cut more of the piping and attach it to each hoop using two cable ties.

**STEP 6.** These materials for the cover have been chosen for a particularly gusty location: strong polythene, spring clamps to hold the cover on to the hoops, plus pipe insulation cut open lengthways to slip around the hoops.

**STEP 7.** The cover should comfortably fit the tunnel dimensions, with plenty to spare to secure at the ends and sides. If it's windy, peg the cover to hoops. Here the spring clamps are placed over the pieces of pipe insulation, which protect the cover.

**STEP 8.** Secure the sides of the cover to the ground. Smooth stones work well, or wrap the sides around a bamboo cane then pin this to the ground with tent pegs. Make sure you can properly secure and close off the two open ends.

**STEP 9.** The completed tunnel. Its generous dimensions will comfortably house even larger crops such as chard, while it should (and did!) resist even strong winds. The sides are easily rolled up to access the crops inside. ■

