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Small Plastic Greenhouses

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SMALL PLASTIC GREENHOUSES

Many home gardeners find a small greenhouse a relaxing hobby as well as very useful. It can be used to root cuttings and germinate seeds for the outdoor garden, special flowers or ornamentals can be raised, and vegetables can be grown out of season. A carefully chosen and attractive greenhouse can provide many hours of enjoyment. However, before building one, be sure to consider:

- location
- type of construction
- heating and ventilating
- maintenance

LOCATION

A sunny location is best. Locate the house as far from trees as practical. A southern or southeastern exposure is best for maximum light during the winter.

The greenhouse should be convenient to water, fuel for heating, and electricity. The area should be well drained.

TYPES OF GREENHOUSES

Almost everyone can find a greenhouse style to suit his needs. There is a bewildering variety of sizes, shapes, and styles. Greenhouses range from window-box size to 20 or 30 feet wide and 100 or more feet long. The size you choose depends on the area available, how much greenhouse gardening you wish to do, and the cost.

Gothic arch, rigid frame, air supported, shed roof, and conventional pitched roof are just a few of the available shapes. A greenhouse that fits both existing landscape and personal preference dictates the choice. Greenhouses are made with glass, fiberglass, polyethylene, or vinyl coverings. Wood, steel, and aluminum are used for framing.

Glass

Glass houses are very attractive, permanent, and expensive. These houses should be built by a greenhouse manufacturer or purchased in a readyto-assemble package because they are difficult to construct. Any gardening magazine advertises companies selling these houses.

Fiberglass

Houses covered with fiberglass are durable, attractive, and moderately priced. They are commercially available or can be designed and built by the home handyman. Only transparent or translucent fiberglass weighing 4 to 5 ounces per square foot should be used. Most manufacturers sell a fiberglass made for greenhouses and it should be guaranteed for 10 to 20 years. Except for shading, lower grades and colored panels should be avoided.

Film Plastic

Film-plastic-covered greenhouses are inexpensive and temporary. They are less attractive and require more maintenance than other styles. Clear polyethylene, 4 or 6 mils (0.004 to 0.006 inch) thick, is most commonly used because it is inexpensive and readily available. Unfortunately polyethylene only lasts from 3 to 8 months because it is rapidly broken down by ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Polyethylene treated with an ultraviolet (UV) inhibitor is slightly more expensive but will last 3 to 6 months longer than the regular polyethylene. This film should be used if the greenhouse is to be covered in the summer or fall.

Longer lasting film plastics are available, but they have other disadvantages besides being more expensive. If more permanence is desired, the house can be covered with fiberglass. Polyethylene film costs 2 to 3 cents per square foot, fiberglass, 40 to 60 cents per square foot. Use seasoned, construction-grade lumber when building the greenhouses described here. Redwood or Douglas-fir is best.

Paint the framework with a white exterior paint to improve appearance and reflect more light.

Posts and wood that touch the ground should be treated with copper naphthenate preservative. Do not use creosote and pentachorophenol preservatives because they release vapors hormful to plants.

Polyethylene film should be installed on calm days. Film plastic first tears at the places where it touches the greenhouse frame or where it is folded. Wide, unfolded sheets of plastic are available and should be used. A batten strip at least as wide as the rafter will help extend film life. Double headed nails are often used to fasten the plastic since they are easier to remove.

Two layers of plastic can be installed to reduce heat loss as much as 40 percent and eliminate condensation on the plastic. An inside layer of plastic 2 to 4 mils thick is spaced 1 to 4 inches from the outside layer to create a dead airspace. Closer or wider spacing does not create an effective dead airspace.

Although two layers are difficult to install, they are well worth the trouble. Typically, both layers can be installed on the outside of the framework with a 2x2 spacer placed between the layers where they are fastened to the rafters. One sheet is held by the 2x2 nailed just to hold it in place. The second sheet can then be held with the batten strip and nails driven through the 2x2 and an inch or more into the rafter.

In small greenhouses, the inner layer of plastic can be fastened to the inside framework with staples driven over a string. Simply pulling the string removes the staples.

HEATING

Types of Heaters

The greenhouse must be heated for winter use. Many types of heating systems are available.

Home Heating Systems. If a home heater's capacity is adequate, it can be extended to a small nearby greenhouse. However, the heat demand is different than that of the home so a separate thermostat and control system are required. A heating contractor normally will be needed for installation.

Space-Heaters. Either electric, gas, or oil spaceheaters are often used to heat small greenhouses. Heated air is circulated by a fan in the heater. Some space-heaters have no fan and so are rather uneven and ineffective. Depending on the size of unit, space-heaters should not be more than 10 to 30 feet apart to produce uniform heating.

Oil or gas heaters must be vented to the outside since the products of combustion are toxic to plants. Electric heaters are easier to install and are convenient but cost more to operate than gas heaters.

Space-Heaters With Ducts. Recently a heating system has been devised to distribute heat more uniformly through the greenhouse. A space-heater with a fan built for moving air in ducts is attached to a clear polyethylene tube (diameter, 12" to 24") hung overhead. The tube has 2- to 3-inch holes punched along it every 2 or 3 feet. Warmed air is blown into the tube and out the small holes to provide uniform heating. When no heat is needed, the furnace can be shut off and the fan left on to ventilate the greenhouse. The fan-heater unit is located near the end of the greenhouse so outside air will be drawn through a door or opening into the fan and tube to be blown throughout the greenhouse. Usually this equipment is not needed for small greenhouses because space-heaters alone are satisfactory and less expensive. Normally, greenhouses are at least 15 to 20 feet wide and 50 to 100 feet long before this equipment is used.

(B.t.u.'s of Heat Required per Hour per Square Foot of Exposed Surface)						
Desired Minimum Inside Temperature	Lowest Expected Outside Temperature					
	35	30	25	20	10	0
50	18	24	30	36	48	60
55	24	30	36	42	54	66
60	30	36	42	48	60	72
65	36	42	48	54	66	78
70	42	48	54	60	72	84

TABLE OF HEAT REQUIREMENTS FOR GREENHOUSES

Forced-Air Furnaces. Home forced-air furnaces and ducts are also used to heat larger houses. Clear polyethylene tubes, such as used with the space-heaters and ducts, can be attached to the furnace and hung overhead for distributing the heat. Again, these furnaces must be vented. wind, quality or tightness of construction, nearness to heated buildings, height of sidewalls, etc. For most construction, each square foot of surface loses 1.2 B.t.u.'s of heat per hour for each degree of temperature difference. The table of heat requirements helps in calculating the heat load.

Amount of Heat

The amount of heat required for a greenhouse depends on the size, minimum outside temperature, minimum temperature required inside, amount of An example of how the heat requirement is calculated is given in figure 1. In this case a 10- by 12-foot greenhouse needs to be heated 40 degrees above the outside minimum temperature.





FIGURE 1. How to calculate heat requirement.

Gas or oil heaters are frequently rated according to the total heat input. Some heat escapes through the vent so the usable heat is only about 70 percent of this total. If a gas heater were used in the greenhouse shown in the example, it should have a heat input rating of about

$$\frac{20,000}{0.70} = 28,600 \text{ B.t.u./hr}$$

If two layers of plastic are used, the heat loss is about 70 percent of the loss through a single layer of plastic. If the house in the example is built with a double layer of plastic, the heat requirement would then be $20,000 \times 0.70 = 14,000$ B.t.u./ hr. Of course, if a gas heater were used with the double plastic, its heat input would be

$$\frac{14,000}{0.70} = 20,000 \text{ B.t.u./hr}$$

Maintenance and Safety

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Choose heaters having a safety switch or safety pilot. Be sure gas heaters are vented.

Clean dust from the burners and ducts before starting heating in the fall.

Check the flame to be sure it is burning with a clear blue color. A yellow flame indicates incomplete combustion and the flame setting should be corrected.

Be sure the thermostat is protected from rain and is operating.

For greater heater efficiency keep the greenhouse doors closed and patch all holes.

VENTILATION AND COOLING

Greenhouses must have air movement for cooling. In winter, air movement is needed to reduce excess humidity, condensation, and dripping of moisture from the roof. Either greenhouse vents or fans can be used.

Vents. A continuous vent at the top or ridge of the greenhouse, combined with vents on the sides, gives the most effective natural ventilation. For small greenhouses, a 1- to 2-foot wide vent is adequate. In larger greenhouses, a ridge vent $\frac{1}{28}$ the width of the house should be used. For example, if a house is 24 feet wide, at least a 3-foot-wide ($\frac{1}{8}$ x 24)ridge vent should be used.

Side vents are often not used in houses less than 15 feet long, since an open door or a few holes at each end allows enough air to enter on hot days. For very small houses, like those on plans 5941 and 5946, smaller ridge vents, open doors, or end vents provide enough ventilation.

Ridge vents should be opened slightly in cold weather to allow some moisture-laden air to escape. With no ventilation, humidity in the greenhouse becomes too high and condensation, drip, and disease become severe problems.

Circulating Fans. Sometimes small fans are used to circulate air within the greenhouse to try to eliminate stagnant air pockets. These fans should only be used to correct a poorly designed heating and ventilating system. In small greenhouses and in greenhouses with good heating and ventilation systems, they are not of much use.

Cooling Fans. More positive air control is needed if the greenhouse is used in the summer. Fans will ventilate even on a calm, hot, summer day. Also, fans are easier to control automatically than vents. However, fans are more expensive and not normally used except in large houses. The fan exhausts the air from the house, and during warm weather it should change the air once every minute.

Cooling Pads. In large houses, a wetted aspenfiber pad can be placed at one end and fans at the other to provide additional cooling. As the air is drawn through the wet pad it is cooled by evaporation—as much as 30 degrees on hot days. If additional cooling is needed in small greenhouses, a package evaporative cooler is more satisfactory. The cooler can be mounted to blow cool air into the house at one end and the door opened on the opposite end to exhaust the air. Coolers should change the air once per minute. The volume of of the house shown in the heating example is 855 cubic feet—the amount of air a cooler for this house would need to deliver per minute. Shading. Shades, of course, besides reducing light, reduce the heat load in greenhouses. Shading compounds that are sprayed or painted on the greenhouse and aluminum, fiberglass, plastic, or wooden screens and panels are available. Partial shading does not normally reduce summer light enough to reduce growth, but it is a good way to reduce the heat load.

Humidification. During hot days the humidity in a greenhouse can become so low that plants are severely dehydrated and even ruined. Moreover, some tropical foliage plants and orchids grow best in high humidities. The least expensive way to increase humidity is to frequently water the gravel under benches and in wolkways. Water nozzles that periodically stray a fine mist are also very effective humidifiers. The nozzles can be automated with a timeclock and electric valve. A time cycle of 1 minute on and 5 to 10 minutes off is common. Commercial greenhouse humidifier units can also be used.

Automation

Watering, heating, cooling, fertilizing and humidifying can all be done au'omatically. Only the budget limits how many chores are automated. Some people prefer to control all of these operations themselves, considering this part of the enjoyment of the greenhouse. However, some jobs are better handled by automatic controls. Heaters should be controlled by a thermostat. Vents or fans can also be thermostatically controlled, but this is not as necessary. Other automation is nice to have but the heating and ventilation system should be automated first.











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