

PORTABLE COLDFRAMES

For many BOG members eating their own vegetables is an important reason why they have a garden, but as many have found they experience feast and famine because of the short season that many vegetables are ready. We have become accustomed to being able to buy an almost complete range of vegetables throughout the year. Some of the products in the greengrocers have been flown thousands of miles; this is not environmentally friendly. Extending the season that our homegrown vegetables are ready is therefore a desirable objective.

Those who have greenhouses and poly-tunnels can go a long way towards growing, salad crops throughout the winter; an early crop of broccoli and peas as well as summer crops that do not thrive outside in our climate.

Although I now have a poly-tunnel I have found that portable cold frames are also useful pieces of equipment for extending the season. I move them from bed to bed as the season goes on. In early April plants brought on in the greenhouse are planted into a cold frame that has been in place for at least a week so that the soil has a chance to warm up. This year I planted lettuce, broad beans, leaf beet and beetroot. The glass top was opened during sunny days from the middle of April and completely removed by mid May. The wooden walls give some protection against chill winds so are left in place until the frame is needed elsewhere.

The base can be used to support fleece or enviromesh when growing crops that need protection from insect pests. At the end of the summer I put them over the late summer lettuce and this keeps them in an edible condition into the autumn. The cold frames I have are home made using where possible recycled materials. Discarded window frames complete with glass are often to be found in skips. The ones I have found to be best are from an old caravan as they have aluminum frames but old sash windows are suitable. The base onto which the window is mounted is a simple rectangle about a foot deep. It should be made about three inches smaller than the window frame in both directions. I have used half-inch plywood fixed to two-inch square timber at the corners although any other suitable timber would do. The timber at the corners is about three inches longer than the depth of the base and extends downwards, these legs are buried into the soil. The structure can be made more rigid by fixing diagonal wires or strings across the top of the base. These wires also serve to support fleece etc.

I do not permanently fix the window frame to the base as this leads to a structure that is difficult to move from bed to bed. If the window frame is heavy there should be no problem with it moving in a high wind but if this proves to be a problem wire fixed to the window frame and a hooks on the timber can be used.

David Catt