

Greenhouses

By Jason Miller

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No matter what their size, these helpful hothouses can extend your growing season and expand your plant options.

Looking for an addition to your yard that can increase your gardening options almost exponentially? Consider building a greenhouse.

“A greenhouse gives you a controlled environment that allows you to extend your season or garden year-round,” said Emmy Hage, a senior greenhouse representative from Charley’s Greenhouse & Garden in Mount Vernon. “You’re no longer limited to gardening only when the weather is good enough to garden.”

That’s it in a nutshell. For many gardeners, a greenhouse provides peace of mind, too, by allowing them to grow a greater variety of produce that isn’t subject to potential recalls. Homegrown vegetables typically are more healthful and fresh, because they haven’t been picked in California before they’re ripe, then driven to western Washington over a period of days.

Here in Skagit County, a greenhouse can help you grow tomatoes and peppers more effectively, because of the “weather control” factor. No longer will you have to watch your tomatoes bear fruit and begin to ripen, only to succumb to blight when a summer rain falls.



Sedro-Woolley Master Gardener Glenice Hanna used mostly architectural salvage to build her greenhouse. The windows, floor joists, and brick flooring are all repurposed from demolished houses. The benches inside are made from used chain-link fence pipes. Only the roof and back exterior wall are not salvage: The roof is greenhouse-grade plastic sheeting and the back wall is corrugated plastic. “We spent very little money building it,” said Hanna.

Photo by Jason Miller.

Materials matter

When building a greenhouse, it’s important to find that sweet spot between your budget and long-term performance.

Of highest importance is the “glazing”—the material you choose to let the sunlight in. Some of the more common glazing materials include single- or dual-pane tempered glass, fiberglass, polycarbonate, polyvinyl and greenhouse-grade plastic sheeting. Some people, such as Sedro-Woolley Master Gardener

Glenice Hanna, use reclaimed windows to dress up their greenhouses in an earth-friendly fashion. Salvaged windows with sealed panes are desirable, because often they are discarded because their seals have been broken. In the world of greenhouses, this is a good thing, because a broken seal means the full spectrum of light will be allowed into the structure.

When I first moved to Concrete and wanted to build a couple small tomato hothouses, I took the inexpensive route and stretched greenhouse-grade plastic sheeting over structural “skeletons” made of metal pipe. Last year, I was able to buy a greenhouse kit with polycarbonate panels, which lets me grow my beloved Brandywine beefsteak tomatoes without fear of blight. Examine your own needs and desires in light of your budget, and find the material and structure size that works best for you.

A green “getaway”

Hage said that greenhouse gardening is becoming a sort of vacation during the downswing in the U.S. economy. “Instead of flying to another country or even across the U.S., people consider gardening almost a vacation—one where they don’t have to spend money on gas or hotel rooms. We’re seeing a lot of people who are turning to their homes” as a source of relaxation.

If you’d like to extend your growing season and put a wider variety of produce on your dining room table, perhaps a greenhouse is in your future.



Concrete Master Gardener Jason Miller chose a prefabricated greenhouse kit, which he assembled at home over a weekend with help from friends and family. He uses his greenhouse to jumpstart his tomatoes and peppers each spring. Photo by Jason Miller.



Sedro-Woolley Master Gardener Glenice Hanna uses her greenhouse as winter storage for “half-hardy” plants and starts delphiniums for spring planting. In spring she starts seedlings. During summer, she dries garlic and grows vigorous tomatoes (shown) in large pots. “[The tomatoes] do wonderfully in there,” said Hanna. “I have 12 gallons of them in the freezer right now.” Photo by Jason Miller.

GREENHOUSE RESOURCES:

BOOKS:

Building Your Own Greenhouse, Mark Freeman and Heather Bellanca, Stackpole Books.

Greenhouse Grower's Companion: Growing Food and Flowers in your Greenhouse or Sunspace, Shane Smith, Fulcrum Publishing

Four-Season Harvest: Organic Vegetables from Your Home Garden All Year Long, Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch, Chelsea Green.

ON THE WEB:

Planning and Building a Greenhouse, David S. Ross, U. of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service
<http://extension.umd.edu/publications/PDFs/FS645.pdf>

Hobby Greenhouse Construction, J.R. Kessler, Jr., Alabama Cooperative Extension Service
www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1105/

Fall and Winter Gardening in the Pacific Northwest, P. Patterson, Oregon State University Extension Service
www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1105/