

PARSNIP CULTURE by Graeme Watson FNVS, Northern Branch

My parsnips are grown under cover in a polytunnel measuring 6m long by 2m wide. The frame is home made from 6 galvanised cloche hoops (available from LBS Horticulture) and timber fencing material in the following way. Fencing stakes (10 no) 75mm square were driven in to the ground 1.5 m apart in 2 rows 2m apart to a height of approx. 1.75m. To the top of these sawn fencing rails were nailed and the ends trimmed off. The hoops are secured using the ground anchors (supplied with hoops) bolted onto the rails and the feet then cut off as they are not required. A door frame and door at one end and raised timber frame (for ventilation) at the other completes the construction. Polythene sheeting is cut and stapled to the rails and the lower sides, ends and door is covered with Enviromesh netting. This allows for good ventilation in hot weather whilst giving protection against strong winds and heavy rain. The main attraction of Enviromesh is its ability to keep out insect pests including the dreaded carrot fly (which is also partial to the odd parsnip!)

The idea behind removable hoops is that the cover comes off at the end of every season thus allowing autumn and winter rainfall to wash residual fertiliser salts out of the sand preventing a build-up which would inhibit future crop growth.

I use old 45 gal steel oil drums with tops and bottoms removed-one and a half deep as the growing receptacle. Other growers use wooden boxes or breeze blocks. The barrels are bolted together and sat on mild steel angle irons on top of a breeze block bed 2 courses deep. The angle irons prevent the barrels tilting on the sand thus keeping them perpendicular. This gives a total root run of 1.8m. In a tunnel of this size it is possible to fit 10 barrels although I am cutting down to 9 next year so as to allow more room at each end-who said I'm putting on weight!!

Washed sea sand is the growing media I use; some of you may know it as plasterer's sand. It took around 12 tons to fill my bed and barrels.

'Pinnacle' seems to be the variety to beat at the moment; it is healthy, has a white skin, carries its weight well down the root and is capable of growing to a good size without becoming coarse. Other notable exhibition varieties are; Gladiator, Albion, Javelin, Countess, Duchess and Picador.

Living in a cold part of the country as I do (North York Moors) I see no point in an early sowing date so I normally go for mid-march onwards. This year-2010 it was March 26th when I tipped the seed out of the packet onto wetted kitchen towel in the warmth of home. It was covered with more of the same and put to one side waiting for the root tip (radicle) to emerge. This procedure is known as pre-chitting, the idea being to get an efficient, rapid and even germination after the chitted seed is placed in the top of the compost borehole core. This process is not without risk, the seed must not be allowed to dry out or the radicle become elongated-check daily after a week or so. **Another** advantage of this system is, if you're like me and always running late it buys a little time!

The borehole mix is as follows; 75 litres of Levington F2s (a finely sieved multi-purpose compost will do) 50 litres of sterilised top soil, 22½ litres med grade vermiculite, 22½ litres of washed sea sand or silver sand. Add to this; 680g seaweed meal, 100ml nutrimate powder and 113 g Osmocote mini 3-4

months slow release pellets. The above is hand mixed on the garage floor with approx. 12 litres of water containing nutrimate liquid added.

I was lucky to be given an old aluminium aerial mast into which I inserted a wooden T piece. It measures over 2 metres long by 75mm diameter and by pushing it down into the sand and withdrawing it slowly, takes out a core of sand. Do this 4 times and I have a perfectly symmetrical hole 1.8 metres deep. At 4 stations per barrel I had 40 parsnips to choose from this year. Before filling the stations with the compost mix I dropped a few pellets of Osmocote 5-6 month slow release fertiliser down-a little reward for the parsnips when they reach the bottom!

Trickle the compost into the cores firming occasionally to avoid excessive settling. When the seed has chitted, I sow at 3 per station approx. 12.5 mm deep. Water and cover with polythene until germination, when a fleece cover replaces the polythene one. The seedlings are thinned to 2 then 1 when the first true leaves are showing.

I use upturned plastic pots under the fleece to make a dome shape and maintain a gap between foliage and fleece. Dispense with the fleece when the weather warms up-mine came off on April 30th this year but watch for frost, I had -8°C on May 12th.

I water sparingly at first avoiding the foliage if possible, only when the compost and sand dry and turn a lighter colour. As the plants grow and the weather warms up more is needed, I was using around 10 litres every other day for my 10 barrels this year, more in very hot conditions. When the sand at the barrel bottoms dries out in summer I water down there as well.

Foliar feeding was carried out using Maxicrop, Nutrisea Gold and Nutrimate Liquid alternatively every couple of weeks from late June onwards.

Aphids can enter the tunnel when the door is open so I keep a watch on the new central growth but they weren't a problem this year.

The barrels are wrapped in black and white polythene, white side outermost to keep the roots cool in summer. In hot years I suspend fleece above the foliage to provide shade-not needed this year! That's about it, other than removing old yellowing foliage as it dies back.

At show time, ease up on the watering a few days beforehand to let the parsnips and sand shrink back ever so slightly to aid pulling. Match the shoulders for size, trim the foliage above the final required height and pull dry. There are two ways to prepare and travel parsnips, either; wash and dry them at home then travel keeping them dry or keep them damp at home or in transit to the show venue, washing and drying there. The problem being once the skin is exposed to light and air it starts to deteriorate to the extent that after a 2 or 3 day show the roots bear absolutely no resemblance to those staged earlier. It's a shame that the public visiting a top 3 day show may not be able to understand why a shrivelled brown set of parsnips was awarded best exhibit!

Enjoy your growing

Graeme