

# Vegetables Start Early in Plastic Covered Trenches

Harvest sweet corn and tomatoes ten days to two weeks ahead of season.

They're doing just that in a research plot at the University of Delaware's Substation in Georgetown, according to Robert Stevens, extension horticulturist. The vegetables were planted March 28—several weeks ahead of the normal schedule—in a special plastic covered trench.

With this system, plants can go

in the ground as soon as the soil temperature starts to warm up. Plants are protected even if air temperatures dip down to 25 degrees provided it doesn't stay that cold for too long. This spring, corn and tomatoes even survived an early April sleet storm.

On a sunny, breezy spring day, the temperature under the plastic is as much as 30 degrees warmer than the open air. On a cloudy, still day, the difference may only be four to six degrees.

The trenches used in the experiment were eight inches deep with one side ridged higher than the other. They run east to west so the plastic catches more sunlight. When the continuous strip of plastic is laid down, water will drain off the slope, Stevens explains. Once the plants grow up to the plastic, it is rolled back.

He used a special plow to make the unevenly ridged trenches; only two of these plows have ever been manufactured. However, homeowners could easily dig the trenches by hand and other plows could be adapted by growers working on a small scale.

The sloped plastic covering didn't work perfectly, Stevens admits. Some water collected. It may be necessary to poke a few holes in the plastic or sweep the water off by hand. Of course, any

holes also let in cold air which could partially defeat the whole purpose of the plastic. makes no difference in the size or quality of the vegetables. There could be more diseases and insects under plastic if they are already on the plants when set out.

Laying down the plastic and digging the trenches is too expensive for large-scale commercial growers, Stevens believes. However, the technique should be valuable for home gardeners and for farmers who grow for the local fresh market or roadside stands.

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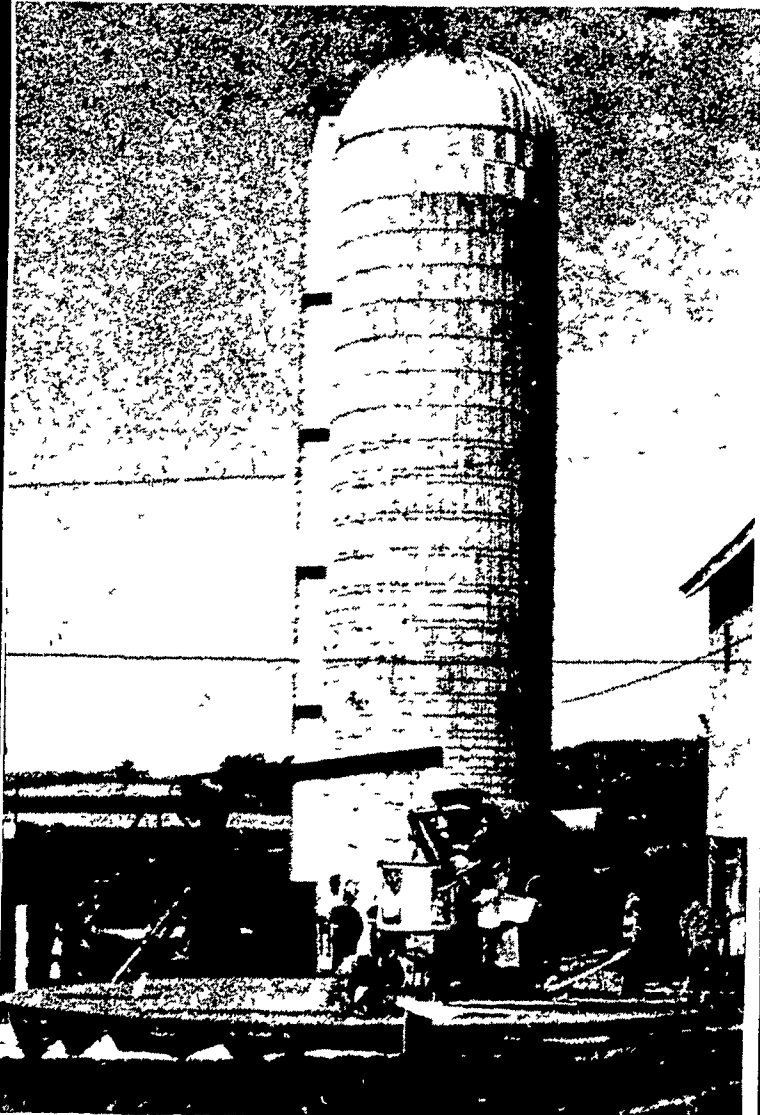
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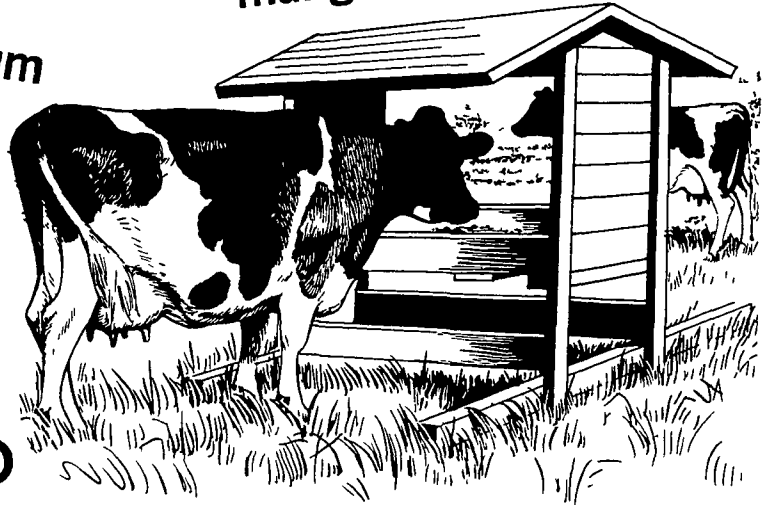
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