

INSIDE & OUT

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THE PLAIN DEALER



GREENHOUSES.COM

You can shop by price on some greenhouse Web sites. This detached Easy 2 Build model, \$899, is on the greenhouses.com site in the "less than \$1,000" category. The 6-foot-long, 8-foot-tall model (it comes in larger sizes) is constructed from heavy-gauge extruded aluminum, twin wall opaque polycarbonate, standard roof vent for fresh-air entry and a real door (no Velcro or zipper).

Greenhouses can stretch gardeners' growing time but require planning

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Gardeners who like greenhouses should thank a powerful person who demanded that fresh cucumbers be available to him at all times, even when the weather was too cold to grow them.

His name was Emperor Tiberius and the year was about 30 A.D. To sate his craving for cucumbers during winter, his builders — perhaps grouchingly — constructed a greenhouse from translucent sheets of mica (glass hadn't been invented) and kept the greenhouse warm with heated rocks.

And so the story goes, as given by the experts on the Web site hobby-greenhouse.com/.

Today, that Web site and other greenhouse designers, builders

and retailers cater to folks who, like Roman emperors, don't see why they shouldn't have a few slices of home-grown cucumber even when it's 12 degrees outdoors and there is 4 feet of snow on the ground.

The industry meets the longings of, among others, Northerners wanting tropical plants in their midst, freezing weather notwithstanding, and of those who just want to chill out, so to speak, in a warm greenhouse three, if not four, seasons of the year.

If you're thinking about adding a greenhouse to your property, the good news is that there's a slew of sources and a vast array of materials, dimensions, shapes and prices. Even if you have a small yard, a greenhouse can still be yours.

SEE GREEN | E6

GREEN

FROM E1

Greenhouses stretch growing time

That's also the bad news: How do you decide what to buy?

That question will be addressed by Arcadia GlassHouse in Painesville and the Cleveland Botanical Garden during its Orchid Mania this year. The event, from Saturday, Feb. 28, to Sunday, March 29, will include the display "10 Steps for Selecting the Best Greenhouse for Your Home or Garden." All visitors will receive a free copy of a planning guide.

Jeff Kenyon, owner of Arcadia GlassHouse (arcadiaglasshouse.com), outlines what the greenhouse-curious can expect to find out:

- The most important decision is whether you want a greenhouse that's freestanding or attached to your home. An attached greenhouse is more energy-efficient and has more convenient access, but it requires a more expensive foundation than do freestanding units.

- Do-it-yourself greenhouse kits are less expensive, but most of the inexpensive catalog greenhouses are made of stamped aluminum with clips that hold the glass in place. These greenhouses don't hold up to Northeast Ohio winters and winds, Kenyon says.

A greenhouse built with an extruded aluminum frame that has a welded truss can support 35 pounds of snow per square foot and winds up to 95 miles per hour. Stamped-metal frames and even galvanized metal will rust in a humid greenhouse environment.

Double-pane glass is stronger, more durable and energy-efficient. However, these greenhouses typically cost twice as much as single-pane greenhouses.

New triple-wall, polycarbonate materials don't look quite as nice as glass but are increasingly popular because of their energy efficiency. They have two pockets of dead air space for insulation and reduce heating costs by 50 percent. But polycarbonate tends to discolor and needs replacing after about 15 years.

Rockford Corp. Greenhouse Systems (440-255-2690) also builds custom

greenhouses and sells build-it-yourself kits. With Rockford, the least expensive greenhouse would be an 8-by-10-foot do-it-yourself that doesn't require a foundation, for about \$2,600. From there, prices can reach up to "if you have to ask" territory.

Rockford owner B.J. Thomas says that greenhouses have gone from functional — a place to nurture and overwinter plants out of season — to hangout living spaces, even when you're not gardening.

"Today's greenhouses are beautiful," Thomas says. "With custom, you can get designs that complement the architecture of your home. You can have windows to match the windows already in their home. Some people put hot tubs in them."

Not only hot tubs, but furniture, fountains, fancy lighting and a pool.

Michael Loos of Ohio State University's Cuyahoga County Extension says it's important to know in advance what plants you'll keep in your greenhouse and how much heat those plants require. If you're growing orchids, your greenhouse will need to be a tropical 75

degrees. Depending on the glass used to make the greenhouse, that could jack up your gas bill. Vegetables, particularly leaf crops that can withstand temperatures of 45 to 50 degrees, won't require as much heat.

Bevo Works (bevoworks.com), an outdoor products Web site that sells greenhouse kits, also says to consider what you plan to grow before buying — orchids, food plants or both?

Consider the need to keep certain plants warmer than others. Some species can tolerate cold fairly well and still thrive, while others can't hold up in near-freezing temperatures.

Keep in mind that it's cheaper to heat one end or corner of a larger structure than to try to heat the whole greenhouse evenly.

Expect a well-made aluminum greenhouse to last a long time, say experts. Or, as Thomas puts it, "We service greenhouses that are 50, 60 years old. Aluminum is amazing stuff."

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