



A GARDENER'S EVOLUTION

by Tim Fleck

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For me, the hardest part of anything is figuring out what you need, and that's particularly true of gardening - an open-ended process starting with puttering around with one or two orchids. As you get proficient at keeping them alive, multiplying quickly explodes to dozens of plants. In this climate, you don't need an outdoor greenhouse for a handful of tropicals. A sunlit breakfast room will do for the four months of the year where temperatures are too cool for their comfort.

In my intermediate stage, I hauled plants in and out of the house throughout winter, after weatherizing a front porch with plastic sheeting, space heater, and humidifier. The house looked like an indoor jungle during cold spells. I lost plants when I didn't have time to bring them in or a freeze snuck up on me. When I sold my Heights place and moved to Lindale Park, I faced it: I needed an outdoor greenhouse.

I started with a Palram "Flower House," a 6 x 8-foot tall, 6.5 foot wide Chinese-made glorified tent with clear plastic and vinyl walls and spring-up carbon support rods, purchased at a local nursery for about \$140. It worked fine for a winter with a space heater but the door flap zippers and ventilation window soon corroded. It was cramped. I needed more space.

An internet search found a Palram prefab greenhouse with aluminum frame and clear double insulated carbonate panels. Price: \$450. A bear to assemble, even with two people, it is attractive with a peaked roof and spacious interior - tall enough to stand or walk around in, or to sit in to read or admire your collection. Equipped with a space heater and extension cord, it's a cozy little meditation room as well as plant refuge. If you love tropicals, having year-round blooms and a place to garden on even the dreariest winter days, soon it becomes indispensable. I'm even considering buying a second greenhouse and attaching the two, something like a habitation module for living on Mars. Doesn't need to be airtight on Earth, Rarely does a project exceed my expectations, but this one certainly has. Just another step in a gardener's evolution.

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Tim added this PS in an email: "*The sunshine did arrive and the tomato seedlings and potted young plants are soaking it up!*" He reported that even tho we've had a few light freezes, this has been the least extreme winter in Houston in at least five years, by his figuring." (His tomato seedings? Brandywine, Cherokee Purple and Black Krim.)