

Hoop Houses and Nutrient Salts

Continuously covered hoop houses can build up nutrient salts to damaging levels after only a few years. This can happen regardless of the nutrient sources used: water soluble, granular, or organic (non-chemical) sources.

Ideally, the hoop should be uncovered for several weeks each year to allow natural rainfall to wash away excess salts. If you use the hoop for winter greens, then make a point of uncovering it for part of the summer. If it is used as a season extender for spring and summer crops, then try to uncover it for a time in the fall before the ground freezes.

Another alternative is to plan on moving the hoop to another location after 2–3 years. Hoop houses can be built on skids, which allow the entire structure to be dragged to a new location and then securely anchored against the wind.

If uncovering or moving your hoop house is not feasible, an alternative option is to remove all row covers and plastic mulch before setting up overhead sprinkle irrigation. Sprinkle irrigation will simulate natural rainfall, provided that the ground is not frozen and the irrigation rate does not exceed the infiltration capacity of the soil. The rate should be slow enough for it to soak in, not run off. Water needs to wash down through the soil to carry the salts down past the root zone. The amount of water needed will depend on soil texture, organic matter content, and the salt level. In any case, several inches of water over 1-2 days will probably be needed.