



# Columbia Nursery

## Extending the Growing Season with Cloches

Gardening Tips for Northwest Montana (Zones 3–5)

At Columbia Nursery, we understand that gardeners in Northwest Montana face one of the shortest growing seasons in the country. Typically, the season runs from mid-May to mid-September—about 18 frost-free weeks. Some crops do fine in this window, but many tender plants need extra protection. With the right tools, like cloches, you can extend your gardening season both in spring and fall.

### What is a Cloche?

A cloche is a small, portable greenhouse that protects plants from cold weather. Originally made from glass, modern cloches can be plastic domes, recycled milk jugs, water walls, or fabric-covered wire hoops. They trap heat and shield plants from frost, wind, and harsh weather.

### Benefits of Using Cloches

- Start planting earlier in spring
- Extend harvests into fall
- Protect young plants from frost, wind, and hail
- Warm the soil for faster seed germination
- Defend against pests (in some cases)

### Best Plants to Grow Under Cloches

- Tomatoes & Peppers
- Cucumbers & Squash
- Lettuce & Spinach
- Broccoli & Cauliflower
- Basil and other tender herbs
- Seedlings and transplants

### Types of Cloches

- Bell Cloches: Traditional glass or plastic domes
- Recycled Jug Cloches: Cut bottoms off milk jugs or large bottles
- Water Walls: Plastic tubes filled with water that store heat during the day and release it at night
- Hoop Tunnels: Wire hoops with plastic or fabric coverings for rows of plants
- Pop-Up Cloches: Collapsible mesh or plastic units for easy setup
- Hotcaps: Waxed paper domes with vent tabs, good for seedlings and compostable after use



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## How to Use a Cloche

### Spring: Start Early

- Place cloches over seedlings or transplants 4–6 weeks before the last expected frost
- Remove cloches when nighttime temperatures stay consistently above 50°F

### Fall: Protect the Harvest

- Use cloches to shield plants from early frosts in late summer and early fall
- Protect tomatoes, basil, and other tender plants to extend harvest time

### Important Tips

- Monitor the weather for temperatures below 40°F and cover plants as needed
- On sunny days above 35°F, open or vent your cloches to prevent overheating
- Anchor cloches securely to prevent wind damage
- Remove cloches before plants outgrow them to prevent weak, leggy stems
- Use clear covers for sun-loving plants and frost blankets for light protection

### Using Wall o' Waters

At Columbia Nursery, we recommend Wall o' Waters for heat-loving plants like tomatoes and peppers. These reusable tubes filled with water act as solar heaters, storing daytime warmth and releasing it at night. Close the tops on cold nights for extra protection, but be sure to remove them when plants grow too tall to avoid weak stems.

### When to Use Cloches in NW Montana

- Start Seeds Under Cloches: Late March–April
- Protect Spring Transplants: April–May
- Extend Fall Harvest: September–October
- Prepare for Sudden Frosts: Any time temps dip below 40°F

### DIY Cloche Ideas

- Cut milk jugs, vinegar jugs, or large bottles
- Use old glass jars for tiny plants
- Build hoop cloches with PVC pipe and plastic sheeting
- Use recycled water bottles to mimic Wall o' Waters (note: you can't close the top with these)

### Summary: Why Use Cloches?

- Grow earlier, harvest longer
- Protect plants from frost, wind, and pests



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- Make the most of Montana's short growing season
- Reuse or recycle cloche materials at the end of the season for eco-friendly gardening

## Need Supplies or Advice?

Stop by Columbia Nursery for frost blankets, & Wall o' Waters, or tips on DIY season extenders. We're here to help you get a jump on the season and keep growing longer!