Polythene - A Guide to Sheeting & What to Look For When Buying (Asbestos Information Included)

Polyethylene, commonly shortened to polythene or PE, is the most commonly used plastic globally and comes in many forms for many uses. Depending on its density, it can be used for anything from plastic supermarket type carrier bags to high density underground pipes and even artificial hip joints. Globally, we produce on average 80 million tonnes of PE annually. Unfortunately, there are currently no bio-degradable forms of polythene sheets available, so emphasis is placed on recycling, and creating durable and long lasting products.

In this case, we're going to detail commercially available polythene sheeting and its extensive list of potential uses. Depending on size and supplier it may come in roll or folded sheet form, with its thickness measured in either a gauge or microns (Mu). Although this measurement may seem baffling to even the most experienced DIY enthusiast, it is the most accurate method of measuring a product which can be a tiny fraction of a millimetre thick. For the purposes of this article we're going to focus on 3 specific grades.

1200gauge/300Mu – 1200 gauge polythene is generally used as a damp proof membrane in building work. It sits under concrete floors or against walls to prevent moisture infiltrating the fragile inner surface.

1000gauge/250Mu – This heavy duty polyethylene is suitable for many applications due to its high durability. It's ideal for temporary roof coverings or windows, and is also suitable for use as a damp proof membrane (DPM). This thickness of polythene is also listed by the health and safety executive as suitable for asbestos removal. **Asbestos can cause serious illness and removal should only be undertaken by trained professionals. Consult HSE asbestos guides for more information.**

500gauge/125Mu – This grade is perfect for protecting surfaces and furniture during decorating, and can also be used for packaging and often for polytunnels. This gauge PE has also been used for weed control either as a mulch or for soil solarisation. This involves placing the sheeting over large areas of bare soil. The sun's rays are magnified by the plastic, increasing top soil heat to a level high enough to destroy seeds and seedlings and also starve the ground of much needed nutrients and water for plants to survive.

Something to look out for when ordering a polythene product is whether it's a 'virgin grade' product. This is the highest grade of plastic and essentially means that it's not from a recycled source, therefore there is a lower level of contaminants within and the transparent type is usually clearer. It's also worth investing slightly extra to purchase a UV stabilised product. This means that it is more resistance to sunlight, making it ideal for window replacements, or as a geotextile. When purchasing all grades from decent suppliers they should be water resistant and rot-proof and the heavier duty plastics will be puncture resistant.