

Low Tunnel Giveaway and Registration

The Kansas Rural Center's three upcoming "Tunnel to Table" workshops will offer experienced and beginning vegetable and fruit growers critical information on applying polytunnels - such as high tunnels and low tunnels - as strategic tools for Kansas farms. Workshop participants who register by Tuesday, August 26, 2014, may apply to receive free low tunnel infrastructure. The workshops will take place on Sunday afternoons, from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m., in Colby (August 31, 2014), Winfield (September 14, 2014), and Clay Center (October 5, 2014).

Polytunnels can be a valuable addition for Kansas farms. "We are a state with extreme weather, which creates unique challenges," explains Julie Mettenburg, KRC executive director. "Polytunnels greatly enhance climatic controls, providing significant crop protection for specialty crops. They can ease many production challenges and dramatically extend the production and income season for Kansas growers."

Strategically applied, polytunnels can help extend the growing season, increase crop protection from extreme weather and pests, and increase quality, yield, and income from vegetables, fruits, herbs and flowers. Tunnel to Table workshop participants will receive critical information and resources for assessing which polytunnel strategies may (or may not) contribute to the success of their current or future specialty crop operations.

Tailored to both established farmers looking to diversify their operation and new growers looking for an entry point to market gardening, each event offers: dynamic presentations from and opportunity to dialogue with experienced Kansas high tunnel producers and farm service providers; an interactive tour of an established tunnel operation (each host farm is quite different – see descriptions below); grower-to-grower networking opportunities; and unique take-home educational materials produced specifically for these events. Each workshop will close with a hands-on demonstration of low tunnel construction and demonstration of how these low-cost and easy to construct structures can offer Kansas crops ample protection and significantly increase the harvest season.

Low tunnels offer an inexpensive entry point to polytunnel production, while providing many of the benefits offered by high tunnels. While plastic covered low tunnels extend the growing season into the winter months and allow for a jump start on spring production, other low tunnels options can benefit crops throughout the whole growing season. For example, fabric row cover can provide low tunnel crops with additional warmth and help exclude pests, and shade cloth covered low tunnels allow for season extension of cool season crops into the hot summer. Used inside of a high tunnel, low tunnels double the cold protection and enable extensive overwintering of cold hardy crops.

Early-bird workshop registrants are eligible to apply to receive approximately 500 square feet of free low tunnel infrastructure, valued at around \$200. Nine workshop participants will go home with custom-bent metal hoops, a 10'x 100' roll of 6-mil greenhouse plastic, and row cover (insect barrier) to provide a physical barrier, protecting crops from insect damage. Anyone who registers for these workshops by August 26, 2014, is eligible for the giveaway - women, minorities, and limited-resource farmers are especially encouraged to apply.

A registration fee of \$15 includes workshop materials, plus beverages and locally-sourced snacks. Registration information, low tunnel giveaway applications, and event details are available online <http://kansasruralcenter.org/low-tunnel-giveaway-and-registration-open-for-krc-high-tunnel-workshops/>, or by contacting Cole Cottin, Kansas Rural Center Program Coordinator, at ccottin@kansasruralcenter.org or 785-992-4572.

Topics of each workshop's presentations and round-table discussions featuring area growers will include: Kansas-specific polytunnel structure considerations, production and marketing strategies, economics of tunnel production, and solutions to common region-specific challenges.

Each workshop also offers the opportunity to tour and learn from a unique farm with established polytunnel systems.

Farm tours include:

Sharing the Bounty, LLC, a five-acre farm located eight miles southwest of Colby, will be open to Tunnel to Table participants the evening of August 3, 2014 - after workshop presentations and round-table discussions at The Prairie Museum. Starting in 2006, Duane and Jo Cheney began providing a variety of vegetables, herbs, and eggs to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) customers. They have continued to increase production and now grow within seven high tunnels (six of which are homemade), allowing them to significantly extend the growing season and increase yields. In 2012, the Cheney's joined the High Plains Food Co-op, greatly expanding their customer base.

On September 14, 2014, Werner Creek Farm in Winfield, will show how a 14-acre farm and homestead has utilized an NRCS funded 30'x 96' high tunnel. The Werners are beginning farmers who sell fresh fruits and vegetables, flowers, herbs, honey, and nuts at local farmers markets. Tomatoes are their main high tunnel crop, but they are experimenting with other crops as well.

The last workshop will take place at Jay's Jellies, Produce and More in Clay Center, on October 5, 2014. With over 6,700 square feet under plastic, this farm grows an immense variety of fresh produce, nearly year-round, on a total 1¼ acres. Jay has constructed all of his farm's six high tunnels - including one kit tunnel, five self-designed high tunnels (several are mobile), and a number of low tunnels for use within and outside of the high tunnels.

In addition to the Tunnel to Table workshop series, KRC will publish an accompanying Decision Making Tool and Resource Guide in late fall 2014. The Decision Making Tool – which integrates data from the survey and study of numerous regional farms – will assist existing and interested growers with deciding which polytunnel option(s) would be the best investment for them. The tool will compare the benefits and challenges of different types of tunnels, as well as cost, income potential, dimensions, temperature increase, season extension potential, appropriate crops, and labor requirements. The Resource Guide will compile the extensive information that is available through numerous publications, websites, farmer networks, and Kansas farm service providers.

Kansas growers with experience using polytunnels of any type are encouraged to complete KRC's Tunnel to Table growers survey, still available at www.kansasruralcenter.org/T2Tsurvey.

The Kansas Rural Center is a non-profit organization that since 1979 has promoted the long-term health of the land and its people through community-based research, education and advocacy that advances economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially just food and farming systems. For more information about the Kansas Rural Center visit www.kansasruralcenter.org.

The most up-to-date information on Tunnel to Table efforts is available at:

<http://kansasruralcenter.org/category/tunnel-to-table/> or by contacting Program Coordinator Cole Cottin at ccottin@kansasruralcenter.org or 785-992-4572.