

Seasonal High Tunnels for Organic

Maria Stewart of Lebanon, Kansas in Smith County is a firm believer in seasonal high tunnels—also known as hoop houses. She's also a firm believer in eating healthy. "The health of our soil is the health of our bodies," she states. Stewart started her small organic operation, "Promised Land Farm," just a few years ago. "The reason I began this in the first place is because I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia in 2000. The doctors told me it was incurable, but that's not the case."

"It was during my illness that I started down the road of nutrition and learned the food in this country is lacking in minerals. Our food is shipped long distances and loses soluble vitamins and minerals in transit. We need high quality food. We are all mineral-starved in this country. We need 65 different minerals in order to be healthy and so does the soil. I went to work and was able to turn my situation around. Last year was the first year I was able to work," she states.

In January 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), launched the seasonal high tunnel pilot study on whether the use of seasonal high tunnels is effective in reducing pesticide use, keeping vital nutrients in the soil, extending the growing season, increasing yields, and providing other benefits to growers.

Seasonal high tunnels at a glance appear to be similar to common greenhouses. They produce a micro-climate like a common green house, but that's where the similarity ends. Crops are planted in the ground under the high tunnel. The high tunnel is built over the crop. Irrigation is necessary and is applied through drip tape. The high tunnel ends are opened and closed as needed to maintain proper air exchange and temperatures for optimum growing conditions.

Seasonal high tunnels extend the production season throughout the year. In Maria's garden, she is growing 30 different vegetables.

"I sold so many green beans my hands turned green from picking them," Stewart laughs. Lettuce is another big seller.

In 2010, she learned how NRCS offered programs that could help her install a high tunnel on her property.

Stewart visited the local NRCS office in Smith Center and NRCS Supervisory district conservationist Steve Wingerson suggested that she apply for financial and technical assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) under the Organic Initiative.

Wingerson also told Stewart she might qualify as a beginning farmer which she did. With this contract, he worked with her and developed a conservation plan for her organic farm.

Stewart has been active in promoting her locally grown organic produce. She has taken her gardening concept a step further and is classified as a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) kitchen.

"I sell a subscription for my vegetables and people get a weekly basket of produce, she explains. "Folks will sign up for produce they want and cross out any they don't. Every week, on a scheduled delivery day, they get five different vegetables in their basket."

“Seasonal high tunnels are part of the “Know Your Farmer; Know Your Food” USDA initiative,” says Wingerson. “The intent is to increase the availability of locally grown produce in a conservation-friendly way. This is a way to develop the local food system and spur economic opportunity,” he adds.

Stewart likes EQIP. “I went with the high tunnel concept—to promote local organic produce and my goal is to cover a 50-mile radius.”

“Through the use of EQIP, my operation has benefited me and an entire community by providing healthy food. I wanted to help other people see the health of the soil equals the health of our bodies. We tend to forget that connection. It fosters a connection between the farmer and the consumer,” says Stewart.

For more information about seasonal high tunnels or natural resources conservation, please contact your local NRCS office or conservation district office. The office is located at your local USDA Service Center (listed in the telephone book under United States Government or on the internet at offices.usda.gov). More information is available on the Kansas Web site at www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov.

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