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High tunnels are becoming mainstays

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TRIPOLI, Iowa —Adam Montri, an outreach specialist at Michigan State University and a farmer, has participated in putting up 65 high tunnels in the last four years.

"For small- and mid-scale farms, the high tunnel is beginning to be as much a mainstay as the tractor," Montri said during an interview while he was leading a high tunnel building workshop as part of a Practical Farmers of Iowa Field Day at Tammy and Rob Faux's Tripoli farm.

Sally Worley, PFI communications director and horticulture program director, said that a high tunnel is a passive solar greenhouse that allows farmers to expand their growing season and improve profitability.

Montri taught participants how to construct a movable high tunnel that can be used year-round without supplemental light or heat. Representatives from Four Season Tools helped with the construction and answered questions about their products.

Worley said the workshop shows farmers who want to put up a high tunnel what it takes to organize a build.

Montri said lots of high tunnels are going up. The oldest ones were built in the 1980s.

"Growers like Eliot Coleman had structures whether it was greenhouses or overwintering nurseries and they noticed that there were green weeds growing in the coldest months, and they thought if weeds could grow in the winter why not crops," Montri said. "In the past few years high tunnel building has exploded."

High tunnels increase farm viability because farmers can grow premium crops in winter and have more stable income.

With the growing interest in local food, consumers want to buy local produce throughout the year, Montri said.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service launched a three-year pilot program earlier this year to provide cost-share funding to farmers who want to use high tunnels, said Worley. The Fauxes are participating in the program.

NRCS will fund one high tunnel per farm through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. To sign up or learn more about EQIP assistance, contact a local NRCS office.

Greg Garbos, president of Four Season Tools in Kansas City, said he and Mike Bollinger, a Decorah farmer, were inspired to start the company by Eliot Coleman, author of the Four Season Harvest, the Winter Harvest Handbook and The New Organic Grower.

A Maine farmer, Coleman developed organic farming systems on his Four Season Farm that allow him to grow food for the local market all year. Movable high-tunnels are at the center of that system, Garbos said.

The focus at Four Season Tools is small-scale organic farms, Garbos said. Movable high tunnels are their niche. The company also offers farm development consultation and implements suited to small farms.

An estimated 35 to 40 people were involved in some aspect of building the Faux Farms' high tunnel.



Kim Hayes of McGregor and Theresa Wilson of Bolckow, Mb., help with assembly at the Practical Farmers of Iowa moveable high tunnel building field day at Genuine Faux Farm near Tripoli.

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Participants came from Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota, western and north central Iowa as well as locally.

Shelley Cords-Swanson of Odin, Minn., came to the field day with her friend Sara Hanson of Wesley. Hanson bought a high tunnel kit and she, Cords-Swanson and other friends plan to put it up.

"We came to learn about the process," Cords-Swanson said. "The hands-on experience is great. I have a lot better idea of how this goes together, what tools we need and the number of people we need."

Hanson, who manages Fresh Connections Food Co-op in Algona, plans to raise vegetables in her high tunnel.



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