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Articles



More High Tunnels in U.S. Fields

The plastic-covered structures help farmers defy the elements that hinder production of specialty crops grown in open fields.

by Mary Shepherd

Back in 2010, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) started a three-year pilot program to promote high tunnels through its "Know Your Farmer,

Know Your Food" (KYF2) initiative. The pilot project will test the potential conservation of growing crops under these structures, which meets the NRCS mission of helping increase the bottom lines of small- and mid-sized farms and encouraging sound conservation practices.

In the program's first year, ending Sept. 30, 2010, more than 2,400 farmers in 43 states received grants of about \$13 million to help pay for these season-extending, plastic-covered structures. Participating growers could receive funding for one 30' x 72' high tunnel, which is approximately five percent of one acre.

Building one of the 2,400 high tunnels

The Genuine Faux Farm, near Tripoli, Iowa, was one of the farms participating in the 2010 NRCS pilot program. Owned and operated by Rob and Tammy Faux, the farm has secured organic certification since 2007 through IDALS (Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship).

The Fauxes raise a variety of vegetables, herbs, chickens and turkeys on five of their 15 acres market their products through a CSA program, farmers market, local stores and institutions.

The selected a 30' x 48' moveable, V-track high tunnel from Four Season Tools. The two-position V-track allows the high tunnel to be moved back and forth on tracks twice its length, as needed for plant protection.



The high tunnel was assembled onsite as a two-day training build offered by Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) and sponsored by the Ceres Foundation. The build was led by Adam Montiri, outreach specialist at Michigan State University and a farmer who uses high tunnels extensively.

The 28 PFI participants came from Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota and all areas of Iowa. Some were planning or had already committed to construct high tunnels on their farms. Others were exploring future possibilities.

Over the two days, an estimated total of 40 people were involved in some part of the two-day build. Relatives came early to help prepare meals and snacks for what turned out to be some very hungry workers. Some of the Fauxes' neighbor farmers, CSA subscribers and former student workers showed up to help where they could be used for a few hours.

Thursday, July 8, 2010 – day one of the build

Day one for the participants was really day two for the farmers, Montri, and the Four Season Tools crew (Greg Garbos,

Randy Metzler and Mike Bollinger). They had laid out the unassembled pieces of the high tunnel and prepared the ground beneath the V-track on Wednesday.

Montri explained the hows and whys of the high tunnel and what we participants were going to do with all those parts lying on the ground, and the Four Season crew showed us how to use the drills, screwdrivers and saws necessary to assemble the roof bows, side walls and end panels.

By the end of the day, the structure's skeleton was standing and part of one end panel was in place.



Friday, July 9, 2010 – day two of the build



By the time we broke for lunch on day 2, the polycarbonate end panels were in place and the wiggle wire channel and other hardware was attached. All that was left to do was get the vinyl cover over the top – a job that took all hands on deck.

The vinyl was spread out lengthwise on the ground beside the high tunnel. Montri taught how to tie tennis balls at intervals inside the vinyl and throw the other end of the rope to the other side. This enabled participants to pull the vinyl evenly up one side, over the top and down the other side.

Even with a light breeze, it took a lot of strength and time to keep the cover tight until the wiggle wire was inserted into the channels to hold the plastic in place.

High tunnels – how far North?

In 1999, few U.S. farmers used high tunnels for food production, and agricultural programs promoting such structures were pretty sparse. However, that changed in Minnesota after Terry Nennich, an Extension educator at the University of Minnesota, saw them in use in Normandy, France.

While trekking through Normandy, Nennich noticed that the numerous tunnels throughout the area were filled with growing plants, despite the cool spring weather. He compared that to what was happening back in Minnesota and talked to the enthusiastic French farmers about their growing system.

"A light bulb went on for Nennich," UM's Extension website states. "One might say his French discovery kickstarted the high tunnel phenomenon in Minnesota."

Nennich and his colleagues continued on-farm research and studied the use of high tunnels for three years and then wrote the University's manual on growing in high tunnels. Their fruitful efforts resulted in an explosive growth of high tunnels throughout the state and gained a lot of believers as farmers in the most northern part of the state began producing specialty crops earlier and later than they could have within the seasonal climates.

The high tunnel was built, and we participants were finished – tired but more knowledgeable about these structures and more appreciative of the work that goes into their construction. We left the trainers were left to do some finishing touches and the farmers to start using their new high tunnel.

For more information about the NRCS high-tunnel program, visit the website www.nrcs.usda.gov or the agricultural department of your state government.

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