

# He Couldn't Afford to Be Average

**H**ow does a vegetable grower stay ahead in the marketing game? By using the latest and greatest in greenhouses: hoop houses.



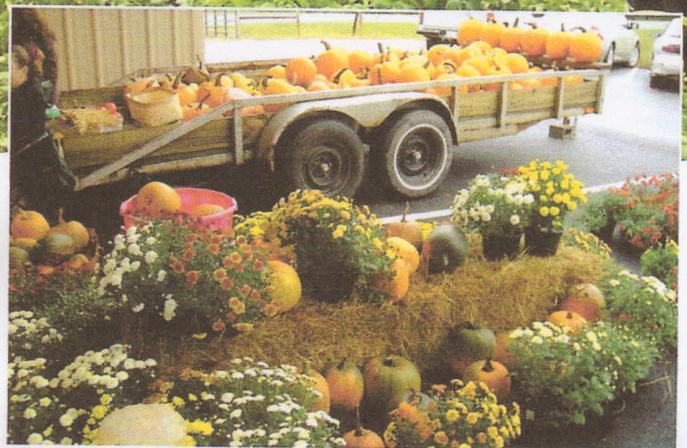
**STAYING AHEAD.** HOOP HOUSES ALLOW NORTH ALABAMIAN LARRY LOUALLEN TO SUPPLY FRIED TOMATO AFICIONADOS WITH THE EARLIEST GREEN TOMATOES—WAY AHEAD OF OTHER AREA GROWERS.

**Hoop houses** are high-tunnel greenhouses—unheated greenhouses built over vegetable, flower, or herb production areas. They differ from other greenhouses in that the plants are grown in the soil rather than in containers.

What do hoop houses have to do with marketing? It's simple. Hoop houses allow growers to harvest and market high-value crops roughly a month ahead of conventional growers. "You can't afford to be average," says vegetable producer Larry LouAllen. "To make a living in this business, you have to do your thing to stay ahead in marketing."

LouAllen, who learned about hoop houses from Extension Urban Agent Jerry Chenault, has found that his greenhouse provides a distinct marketing advantage: the potential for supplying the area's fried tomato aficionados with the earliest green tomatoes.

Chenault first discovered the benefits of hoop houses while attending a professional meeting several years ago. He was so taken with the greenhouses that he began spreading the word to vegetable growers across the state. "You can expect to harvest more than 15 pounds of tomatoes from each plant, and many growers routinely harvest 20 to 25 pounds from each plant," Chenault says.



Producers can also grow varieties that otherwise couldn't be grown in a field because of the cracks and splits associated with uncontrolled rainfall. And they can intercrop around their tomato plants, growing other lucrative vegetables such as lettuce. The comparatively inexpensive greenhouses also protect plants against damage from weather and disease.

Urban educators like Chenault are demonstrating the benefits of hoop houses all across the country. In fact, these greenhouses received national attention in 2008 when former pro basketball player Will Allen received the \$500,000 MacArthur Foundation grant for his work developing community food systems in urban areas.

Hoop houses are easy to rave about. The one difficulty LouAllen has encountered so far is the thickness of the tomato plants—a factor that makes harvesting more challenging. But with business booming, he considers this only a slight inconvenience.