



CONSERVE New Hampshire: High tunnels provide more locally grown fresh fruits, veggies

It's hard to beat produce grown in New Hampshire. It's often fresher and tastier, uses less energy for transport, and helps farmers in your community. But the off-season presents a big challenge for farmers who grow fruits and vegetables and for consumers who want to find local produce throughout the year.

When farmers can lengthen the growing season, even by several weeks, their options change. That's why the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service promotes seasonal high tunnel as such a powerful tool.

High tunnels are plastic-wrapped, metal-framed structures that are fairly easy and inexpensive to build. They are designed to extend the growing season into the colder months, helping to increase the availability of local produce, keep plants at a steady temperature and even conserve water and energy.

High tunnels are similar to greenhouses, except they are considered "passively heated." That means they do not require electricity to heat – only sunlight. The plastic on the frame actually provides enough insulation to add up to 12 extra weeks to the growing season, depending on location. The inside of a high tunnel boasts its own microclimate, often producing crops of higher quality and quantity than those in traditional farm fields.

High tunnels are also different than greenhouses in that the plants are actually in the ground, not in pots or on tables. You can think of it as a plastic covering over a field.

HIGH TUNNELS:

In the past three years, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service has helped producers build 7,200 high tunnels.

Learn more about high tunnels:

<http://go.usa.gov/gh4W>.

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High tunnels can cut costs for the producer by conserving water and requiring fewer inputs, like fertilizers or pesticides. In high tunnels, these inputs are often applied through tubes that run along the base of the plants, allowing water and fertilizer to be delivered directly above the soil. Outside of high tunnels, these inputs are often dispersed on a larger scale and require more to ensure the plants receive an adequate amount.

NRCS helps farmers build high tunnels, providing technical expertise and funding. Local and regional markets often provide farmers with a higher share of the food dollar, and money spent at a local business often continues to circulate within community, creating a multiplier effect and providing greater economic benefits to the area. This is why USDA is encouraging its agencies to provide tools like high tunnels to strengthen local food systems.

NRCS started helping farmers incorporate high tunnels into their operations in 2009, and in the three years since, more than 7,200 high tunnels were built across the United States. Nearly 200 of those high tunnels were built in New Hampshire. To learn if they're right for you and your land, contact your local NRCS office at a USDA service center near you.

About NRCS:

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helps America's farmers and ranchers conserve the nation's soil, water, air and other natural resources. All programs are voluntary and offer science-based solutions that benefit both the landowner and the environment. Learn more at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/nh/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=nrcs144p2_015648

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