

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

A High Elevation High Tunnel

Dale Kriner, Soil Conservationist

Somerset County, PA

September 2016

Darlene and her husband Ernie live on the farm in the northeast corner of Somerset County where Ernie grew up. He is a coal miner by trade but lately, that work has been intermittent. Darlene had been attending local farmers markets where she was selling herbs and vegetables. But early arriving winters and the late arrival of spring in the mountain area southeast of Johnstown limited both the growing season and the type of plants that could be grown. They decided to apply to NRCS for funding to install a high tunnel in order to increase both the length of time they had product available and the product variety. Once a contract was signed, construction of the high tunnel took all summer, just like growing a full-season plant.

Darlene and Ernie ordered the high tunnel kit and then, like the plants under the snow, they waited. Eventually, better weather arrived and they were able to start ground prep for the high tunnel. Then the plant seeds arrived and they started ‘planting’ the upright posts for the high tunnel.



Just like in other farming, there were setbacks. Extra parts were delayed or the wrong ones delivered. Ernie got called back to work, so the time available for construction (fieldwork) decreased. However, just like a plant, the slow and steady ‘growth’ of the high tunnel is apparent. The wonderful weather, light winds, and bountiful sunshine over Labor Day weekend provided a chance to install the plastic cover and work on the end panels.

In the meantime, Darlene reports that she has received several marketing opportunities because people know she has the high tunnel and will be able to provide items after the first frost shuts down local field production.

Darlene and Ernie are eagerly awaiting spring and the new cropping year. Darlene says she sees a noticeable difference in some of the ‘inside vs. outside’ test plots she is doing to determine the best use of the limited tunnel space.

