High tunnels are an excellent way to increase crop productivity because they extend the growing season for plant production,” said Kim Galland, NRCS District Conservationist in Multnomah County. “They allow farmers to plant earlier in the spring and later into the fall, while protecting the crops from frost. They allow farmers to get higher yields, better production, hit the market earlier, and provide longer service to their customers.”

ON-THE-FARM BENEFITS

Stacey Givens owns a unique operation in Portland’s northeast Cully neighborhood called The Side Yard Farm and Kitchen. It’s an urban farm with three separate lots within one mile from each other, a supper and brunch club, and a catering company. When she’s not busy farming and cooking, Givens also coordinates weddings, parties and other special events on her farm, including kid camps and education activities. She even dabbles in bee keeping.
Her farm provides 15 Portland restaurants with local produce. That includes about 20 species of culinary herbs (basil, sage, lemon verbena, edible flowers, and more) and a variety of vegetables (greens and lettuces, root and bulb veggies, tomatoes, beans)—and her favorite crop, ground cherries.

“We grow a lot of specialty herbs and interesting things that we only sell to chefs,” she said. “I try to keep it exciting, like a candy store for chefs.”

With assistance from NRCS, Givens installed a 20-foot by 45-foot high tunnel on her newest property, a one-acre lot in North Portland’s Cully neighborhood.

“We needed something to grow tomatoes in so we could extend our growing season and get more production,” Givens said. “We have about 84 tomato plants in here, which is more than we’ve ever done. For an urban farm, 84 tomatoes is a lot! I’m very happy with the size of the high tunnel and what we qualified for.”

“The luxury of having roll-up sides that easily just roll up, it’s amazing. It’s absolutely amazing,” Givens said. “I still can’t believe I have this. I get a lot of compliments. You don’t normally see a large high tunnel like this in an urban setting, it’s usually for large scale farmers.”

High tunnels like the one on Given’s farm are extremely beneficial in urban settings because they reduce the need to transport produce from out of town.

“These high tunnels are producing food on a local basis for an area that has a metropolitan base, so it cuts down on the energy consumption of the region,” Galland said. “It allows Stacey to grow more food to feed her community, and it’s all being done on a small-scale urban plot. It’s really amazing to see the...
benefits of high tunnels, not just for the farmer, but also for the local community.”

## SOIL MANAGEMENT

In addition to providing financial assistance for the high tunnel, NRCS is also helping Givens with soil management.

“We will take soil samples, send them to a lab, and see exactly what’s going on in her soil,” Galland said. “The end result will be a nutrient management plan. That plan will help Stacey get maximum production by using her fertilizers more effectively. It can save her money, because she won’t be wasting money on excess fertilizer if her plants don’t need it. It also has tremendous benefits for the land because it reduces excess fertilizer run-off that may cause problems elsewhere.”

“In the urban farm setting, it’s very intensive farming. We are turning over beds as fast as we can,” Givens said. “We’re not leaving beds just lying there for more than a day. During the winter we’ll put cover crop in and let them rest, but we’re constantly turning over and turning over. That’s why soil management is so important to us.”

“You will not have productive plants if you do not have healthy soil,” Givens said. “It’s a living thing, you’re feeding it. You have to feed your soil, and doing it properly is extremely important.”

## FARM TO TABLE

Givens has a knack for the farm-to-table business because she worked in restaurants since she was 15 years old.

About eight years ago, she worked at a Portland restaurant with its own rooftop garden. There, she split her time between the two things she loves most—farming and cooking. That position inspired her to cultivate her own farm-to-table business. She started farming in 2009, and over the years she has gradually expanded her operation to what it is today—an urban farm, supper club and catering company.

“I was drawn to Portland because of the food scene, and the restaurant and farming scene,”
Givens said, “Ten years ago, Portland was a little different. Now you see restaurants and food carts everywhere—it’s one of the top food destinations in the nation. And it’s awesome to be a part of it.”

**TRANSFORMATION**

Givens leased her newest lot in 2014, and in just one year she completely transformed the one-acre property.

“We have a really awesome landlord who gave us a long lease and helped us develop this property,” she said. “This lot was abandoned for about 10 years. It was very hilly with a lot of blackberries, thistle, and weeds. There were areas with big chunks of cement that we found, and random junk everywhere. People would just come here and pitch a tent, drink, and just party here and trash it. So it was a really long process to clean it up.”

After a year of labor-intensive clearing, scraping (and re-scraping), building plant beds, and hauling compost—it’s now a neighborhood gem.

“So many neighbors walk by and love what we’re doing and they help us out, they lend a hand. We love our neighborhood,” she said.

**ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE**

NRCS has technical and financial assistance available for urban producers to pursue high tunnels and other conservation on their operations. Funding is provided by the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – a Farm Bill program that allows NRCS to reimburse producers for a portion of the expense.

“I think a lot of urban farmers don’t think about government funding, because we’re so small scale,” Givens said. “They may not think about organizations that could help us. I know I didn’t, until a large scale farmer told me about NRCS. So I urge other farmers to definitely look into the NRCS for any help with soil management, irrigation, high tunnels, because it’s definitely worth it.”

To see what opportunities are available in your county, contact your local USDA Service Center or visit www.or.nrcs.usda.gov.

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