

HIGH TUNNEL TOUR, YAKIMA

“Baby, It’s Warm Inside!”

Jacqueline Cramer, Tilth Producers, Seattle

They’re called hoop houses, greenhouses, high tunnels, and season-extenders—and they are being used by increasing numbers of growers to diversify and increase productivity



The many faces of Tilth Producers observe and learn, now at an Alvarez Farms hoop house in Mabton, Washington, on November 8, 2013.

Photo credit: Jacqueline Cramer

and profits.

On the Tilth Producers November 8 high tunnel tour, over 60 enthusiastic people visited three innovative, organic, Yakima Valley farms which employ high tunnels with success. Fellow farmers learned how each grower chose, designed, funded, and operate high tunnels.

Attendee Jeremy Cowan from Washington State University Extension, an expert in high tunnels and the new Regional Extension Horticulture Specialist in Spokane County, describes high tunnels as, “season extenders which may have open or closed ends, some large enough to drive a tractor through, and with sidewalls that can be rolled up for ventilation or secured to the tunnel’s frame.”

A veteran of season-extension, Hilario Alvarez of Alvarez Farms in Mabton has over two dozen season-extending houses. The excitement was visible as tour participants arrived, eager to see the operations of this well-known, productive farm. Alvarez Farms has established a leading edge in the marketplace with early and late crops grown in the heat of their houses.

Hilario shared yield information for cucumbers and peppers, early plant and harvest dates, and stories of peanut crops and pepper wreaths. Inside the hoop houses, a wood burning stove provides

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Inside one of the high tunnels on the Alvares Farm in Mabton, Washington, surrounded by iznik cucumber vines, Hilario Alvarez informs attendants of the 39th annual Tilth Conference of how high tunnels are an affordable option for extending the growth season of many plants and for growing different varieties of produce. *Photo credit: Jacqueline Cramer*

daytime heat; at night, thermostats monitor temperatures and trigger the propane furnace to keep temperatures up. In the summer, they cover the high tunnels with shade cloth to prevent scalding. Around the farm, Hilario shared his knowledge, resourcefulness, resilience and spirit.

At Heavenly Hills Harvest Farm near Sunnyside, Merritt Mitchell Wajeed's high tunnels demonstrated her holistic-farm approach. Inside these high tunnels, flowering perennials host pollinators and beneficial insects, and vertical growing maximizes space. In the edges with low vertical clearance, winter salad greens grow in soil pockets atop straw bales which help heat the space as they begin to decompose.

The farm acquired funding from the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) for this and other projects. NRCS agents Brian Jackson and Sergio Paredes gave detailed background on NRCS programs, how to apply, and the odds of receiving funds. Merritt provided details about the process from her perspective, including how she came to make certain decisions regarding size, layout and materials used in the hoop houses. Ellen Gray of the Washington Sustainable Food and Farming Network reminded attendees that NRCS funding for these projects came through the Farm Bill, and currently there is not an active Farm Bill since Congress has not passed one.

Along the fields, attendees toured an NRCS-funded pollinator hedgerow, newly planted and increasing habitat for pollinators. Two farm interns shared their experience of working at Heavenly Hills Harvest.

In Zillah, third generation grower Virginia "Gini" Obert of Bella Terra Gardens told the history of her property and her family's agricultural roots in the valley. Bella Terra was described as

an evolving work in progress, shaped in large part by the desires of its chef clients and CSA members. Gini shared details on what has worked and what hasn't, stressing the need to be flexible in order to succeed.

A tour of the double-walled, 30' wide, 12' high and 72' long tunnel was

proof that these tunnels can reach over 80 degrees F. on a sunny November day. Gini explained that being able to roll up the walls is essential in most seasons. The structure must be built on a level area, considering wind and snow loads, and planning for water lines that won't freeze. In choosing a company to buy from, sales people who know NRCS grant parameters help move the process along. Gini credited her farm employees for their work on the tunnel and management of diverse crops.

Riding together in vans, attendees networked and shared experiences as the tour moved across the valley. They shared reflections and stories of their own farms. When it came time to end the tour, participants were reluctant to leave the camaraderie felt from spending the day together, much like leaving the warmth of a high tunnel on a winter day.

Jacqueline Cramer is the Education Program Coordinator for Tilth Producers. She is motivated by the synergy and connections that people naturally make when coming together to share and create solutions. jacqueline@tilthproducers.org



Greens beside a rolled up wall in Gini Obert's Bella Terra Gardens hoop house in Zillah, Washington. The ability to roll up walls is key for most seasons, explains Gini. *Photo credit: Jacqueline Cramer*



Winter greens grow inside soil pockets atop strawbales in one of Merritt Mitchell Wajeed's hoop houses at Heavenly Hills Harvest Farm in Sunnyside, Washington. Bales add warmth as they decompose, and increase growing space.

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