

# High Tunnels and Marketing

One of the primary reasons for adding high tunnels to a farm is to increase marketing opportunities. High tunnels enable growers to extend their marketing season. And because crops grown in high tunnels are usually of better quality, they usually command a higher price and attract quality-conscious shoppers.

Producing a crop in a high tunnel is typically more costly than growing it in the field, due to the structure's capital costs and increased manual labor requirements. On the other hand, when calculating the cost per pound or bunch produced, high tunnels often come out ahead. Depending upon the year and the crop, high tunnel yields tend to be significantly higher than those for field production. The more controlled environment favors production quantity and quality. And when outdoor yields are severely impacted by weather, pests, or other factors, the comparison can be particularly striking.

Since the investments in high tunnel crops are greater, it makes sense for farmers to maximize the returns on high tunnel crops through a deliberate choice of marketing strategies. Small farmers often find direct marketing to be essential, whether through farmers' markets, farm stands, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and even restaurant sales. Out-of-season production can pose significant challenges for marketing but it can also offer tremendous potential for creating a profitable niche.

## Boosting Value

There are many ways to enhance the value of production. When direct marketing at farmers' markets or to chefs or small retailers, product diversity can enhance sales and put a farm in a preferred position. Since an individual customer will only use a

finite amount of one product, a farmer can boost the food dollars spent by each buyer by offering more products. Most direct marketers raise a variety of crops during the growing season, and this can also be an effective strategy during the extended season.

For direct sellers, good signage, a friendly and positive demeanor, and attractive product presentation will probably be adequate for creating an effective image. Home-grown promotions that take a little time but cost little or nothing can also help create a buzz. Farmers can pitch their stories to the media with press releases or phone calls suggesting why they are of interest. Writing a newspaper column or getting a gig as a radio show guest will also increase public exposure. A public open house or tour for chefs are other means to make an impression on potential or current customers.

Packaging, labeling, websites, brochures, ads, or other forms of branding may play a role in adding value, depending on the market outlet. Any of these items may be helpful in the right situation. For example, a brochure is indispensable for CSA farmers like Andy Jones in recruiting members annually. Steve Groff belongs to a grower co-op selling tomatoes and other crops to supermarket chains. A life-size cut-out of Steve for display in the supermarkets helped create demand for the group's produce. As wholesalers with 50 acres of high-value crops in production, the Cramers can justify having a couple of websites where buyers can view their flowers and learn about the seed varieties they sell. For most small-scale growers, high expenditures on a lot of costly professional marketing materials are usually not warranted.

## Farmers' Markets

With minimal investment, farmers' markets give farmers the opportunity to represent their farms and their products directly to the public. Good farmers' markets can be very competitive marketplaces; however, they also gather together far more shoppers for a compressed period of time than most individual farm stands. Successful farmers' market vendors develop relationships with their customers. They establish loyal followers who are not distracted by lower prices offered by other farmers at peak harvest.

The competition inherent in successful markets also speeds up the spread of appropriate innovations like high tunnel production methods. With shoppers comparing the various sellers, willingness to learn and flexibility to change are important attributes for farmers whose primary outlet is the farmers' market. Seth Jacobs has tried to position Slack Hollow Farm ahead of the curve. He was the first in his market to grow large quantities of spinach all winter in an unheated high tunnel. As other farmers adopted this practice, he anticipated the next opportunity by constructing a ground-heated tunnel to expand and diversify his winter production.

## Taking Initiative to Extend the Farmers' Market Season

When farmers decide to use high tunnels to lengthen their harvest, they may not find a ready market awaiting them. For instance, farmers who rely on mid-season farmers' markets may have no outlet in early to mid-spring, late fall, or throughout the winter. Without a good market outlet, there is no point in extending the season.

Waiting for a market to appear is not practical. Instead, many farmers are

taking initiative to develop or strengthen markets to serve their needs. Farmers need not organize markets single-handedly. Some of the best farmers' markets are joint projects of the farmer members and community advocates or enthusiasts. Farmers generally do need to stay involved to ensure the market will continue to work for them.

One of the most promising strategies for farmers growing in the winter is starting an indoor winter farmers' market. With proper planning and publicity, these new markets are finding receptive audiences. Our region now boasts at least four weekly winter markets, all started between 2002 and 2006. Fresh spinach, brassicas, salad mix, and sometimes kale and chard are popular winter items, and unless there is a large producer in attendance, greens usually sell out early in the market day.

Some farmers' markets only run from mid-June through September. Such a short time frame is not conducive to the creative use of high tunnels. For regular farmers' markets to start earlier in the spring or continue later into the fall, farmers must have appealing foods and other products to sell at these times.

A farmers' market will not attract a critical mass of shoppers if spring greens are the only product for sale. Vegetable farmers who are extending the season might want to recruit farmers who sell meats, poultry, cheeses, and other animal products, as well as bakers and processed and prepared food makers to create diversity and interest at a market.

### **Pick-Your-Own**

Under the right circumstances, fruit grown in high tunnels can be an ideal crop for a pick your own operation. Of the fruit with which we are familiar, fall raspberries and sweet cherries seem to be especially good candidates. The appropriateness of

pick-your-own depends on a farm's location, the temperament of the farm operator and farm family, and the capacity of the farm to accommodate large numbers of customers and their vehicles. Another consideration is the timing of the harvest season for a particular type of fruit. Even when fully vented, the temperature in single bay high tunnels can become stifling in warm weather.

Ed Weaver has found the climate protection offered by his multi-bay high tunnels to be attractive to his pick-your-own fruit customers. The quality of his sweet cherries is much improved, and even in inclement weather, customers can come and harvest protected from the weather. Due to the potential for spreading disease, pickers need to stay out of plantings when leaves and fruit are wet, even though rain may have ceased. Because of these factors, high tunnels enhance his customer base.

### **Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)**

Instead of increased profit, the most important benefit for the Community Supported Agriculture farmer's livelihood may be risk mitigation. A CSA farmer might not be able to isolate the actual economic return from a high tunnel since CSA members pay a lump sum for their share of the entire harvest.

CSA members agree to share the financial risks with the farmer when they purchase a share in advance. It is in the interest of the CSA farmer to minimize the production risks inherent in agriculture and deliver the vegetables the members expect. Otherwise members may become disgruntled and the future of the CSA may be jeopardized.

For example, CSA farmers in northern climates often use high tunnels to ensure an adequate and sustained tomato crop. The added warmth of a high tunnel may permit an earlier

harvest, and will guarantee production even in a cold year. By avoiding precipitation and associated disease, high tunnels will often keep the crop going longer. In a rainy year, high tunnel tomatoes usually significantly outperform field tomatoes. All of Andy Jones' high tunnel production goes to his CSA members. Having a consistent, high quality tomato crop helps keep Andy's members happy and coming back year after year.

Starting the CSA harvest earlier in the season or extending it later into the fall can also be achieved with high tunnels. A longer season may well allow the farmer to command a higher price per share. A CSA farmer might also use high tunnels to increase the diversity of produce at the growing season's start, even in a wet, cold spring. All of these uses can help a CSA farm differentiate itself and attract a loyal membership.

Some farmers have organized winter CSAs using high tunnels to produce greens. Winter CSAs can be as simple or complex as the farmers wish. In Wisconsin, a farmer started a stand-alone spinach share. He delivered spinach every couple weeks to Madison customers over the course of the long cold winter.

In a more typical winter CSA, fresh salad ingredients like high tunnel-grown spinach, brassicas, and even lettuces complement storage vegetables like carrots, onions, beets, parsnips, rutabagas, and winter squashes. Winter CSAs tend to provide vegetables to their members less frequently than growing season CSAs. Biweekly or monthly deliveries from December through March are typical.

A winter CSA need not be very demanding of the farmer's time. Providing off-season cash flow may give winter CSAs value beyond the relatively low income they bring in. Another benefit of a winter CSA is

allowing the farmer to amortize the capital costs of the structure over multiple crops per year.

Some CSAs are collaborations among two or more farmers. Some CSA farmers are not interested in continuing production into the winter, but have the ability to grow sufficient storage crops to serve a CSA. A high tunnel farmer who grows greens during the winter could join forces with such a farmer. This sort of CSA partnership presents a direct sales opportunity for a high tunnel grower in areas where there are no winter farmers' markets.

### **Selling Directly to Restaurants and Specialty Stores**

To gain acceptance with chefs and specialty stores, farmers find that interesting, superior tasting and exotic varieties are a real draw. Careful variety selection also “adds value,” entitling the producer to higher prices. The Zemelskys have maintained strong prices for their tomatoes with an upscale chef clientele by growing heirloom tomato varieties.

The fact that such varieties may be less productive, don't travel or store well, or may be more delicate makes them less attractive for many farmers, but these characteristics also open up a niche for small farmers who depend on direct marketing. Since these finicky crops are not easily mass marketed, they have not been embraced by supermarket chains or produce distributors. Specialty stores and independent restaurants can use these varieties to distinguish themselves from chains by offering these kinds of specialty vegetables.

### **Wholesaling**

Effective wholesaling requires appropriate volumes of consistent products. The task of the wholesaler is finding customers who appreciate what they have to offer. In good wholesale situations, quality matters, and high tunnels can help guarantee the desired quality. Getting a jump on the season and providing reliable delivery and service are other attributes that create enduring relationships with wholesale customers. Early production gets Cramer's Posie Patch in the door with brokers who would otherwise look elsewhere for their suppliers. And the

high quality flowers they grow in their tunnels help them keep their customers all season long.

Some buyers are interested in purchasing from farms in the region as a way to gain their own customers' loyalty. For instance, Hannaford, a Maine-based grocery chain, recently stepped up its locally grown program with the hope of attracting more farmer suppliers and capitalizing on their efforts with a customer campaign.

A group of Lancaster County growers, including Steve Groff, have developed a wholesaling relationship with a regional supermarket chain in Philadelphia and its suburbs. High tunnels gave the group an edge in dealing with this buyer. The Haygroves afford more consistent production and higher quality, two critical factors for supermarkets that are staking their future on excellence in their produce departments. In addition, the group is able to supply tomatoes beginning early in the spring, and extending late into the fall, long after field production in the region has been shut down by frost and disease pressure.