

Kansas Rural Center's "From Tunnel to Table" Program

A new Kansas Rural Center project will help Kansas farmers evaluate polytunnel options that would assist them in expanding specialty crop production on their farms. The KRC "Tunnel to Table" project will produce a resource guide, decision-making tool, and regional workshop series, which will take place throughout the 2014 growing season. A Specialty Crop Block grant awarded by the Kansas Department of Agriculture will provide support for the project.

Polytunnels are structures that provide protected growing spaces to help farmers better manage the considerable climate challenges faced in Kansas. Through this project's materials and workshops, Kansas specialty crop growers and farm service providers will receive extensive information and hands-on tutorials to assist farmers with making important decisions about scale-appropriate investment in polytunnel infrastructure. "We anticipate that this project will lead to enhanced protection, production, profitability, and competitiveness of Kansas specialty crops," states Julie Mettenburg, executive director of KRC.

In Spring 2014, KRC will kick off the first in a series of on-farm workshops that will give participants hands-on experience in the production of specialty crops under the protection of plastic. The workshops will highlight different types of polytunnel structures (low tunnel, caterpillar tunnel, high tunnel, and mobile tunnel) and how they are used during various seasons and in diverse regions of Kansas. The workshops will include a demonstration of low tunnel construction and will highlight the benefits of integrated use of low-tunnels within high tunnels and of movable high tunnels, also known as mobile tunnels. An accompanying Resource Guide will compile, organize, and make easily accessible the extensive information that is already available through numerous publications, websites, farmer networks, and Kansas farm service providers. Topics will include: acquiring materials, construction, economics, crop specifics, challenges, problem solving, innovations, accessories, fertility, and pests and diseases.

In addition to the Resource Guide, a Decision Making Tool will be created to assist interested farmers with deciding which polytunnel option(s) would be the best investment for them. The tool will compare the benefits and challenges of each type of structure, as well as cost, income potential, dimensions, temperature increase, season extension potential, appropriate crops, and labor requirements.

Explains Dan Phelps, a specialty crop grower and the activity coordinator for the Tunnel to Table project: "Farmers currently lack adequate resources to inform their decision-making about how to access and integrate tunnels into their growing systems and which tunnel system will work best for maximizing their return on investment."

Polytunnels are simple in design and inexpensive, considering the dramatic yield increase that they make possible. These structures range from do-it-yourself tunnels made from plastic or metal 'hoops' (bent pipe) covered with a single layer of plastic, all the way to the state-of-the-art mobile tunnels, that can be moved from one piece of ground to another and are structurally engineered to handle wind and snow that can destroy cheaper models.

Polytunnels are a vital component in a diversified specialty crop farm. They give farmers the ability to dramatically extend their growing season to the point that there is no ‘off-season’, and thus extending their income generating window. They also allow climatic control throughout the year, offering protection not just from the cold and snow but also from wind, hail, heavy rain, and even the heat. Polytunnels also enable farmers to exclude pests that can cause crop damage and that pose food safety risks.

“The economic potential for specialty crops grown in polytunnels is enormous,” says Phelps. Of the \$760 million Kansans spend annually on fruits and vegetables only 4 percent are produced in-state. Kansas grown specialty crops only amount to \$32 million annually - a mere 0.3% of Kansas’ total agricultural sales.

The Kansas Rural Center is a non-profit organization that since 1979 has promoted the long-term health of the land and its people through research, education, and advocacy that advances economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially just food and farming systems. More information about the Kansas Rural Center and its work is available at www.kansasruralcenter.org.

To learn more about the Tunnel to Table project or to get involved, contact Cole Cottin, KRC program coordinator, at ccottin@kansasruralcenter.org or 785-992-4572.

Kansas growers with experience using polytunnels of any type are encouraged to complete the Tunnel to Table growers survey, available at: www.kansasruralcenter.org/T2Tsurvey.