



Spring planting ...  
February 22, 2011

High tunnels are structures that modify the growing climate, allowing for tender, sensitive, and specialty crops like certain varieties of vegetables, herbs, berries, and others to grow where they otherwise may not. High tunnels are constructed of metal or plastic bow frames at least six feet in height and covered with a single layer of polyethylene.

## NRCS Conducts High Tunnel Pilot Project

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is conducting a three-year high tunnel, or hoop house, pilot project. The project started in FY 2010. Through this pilot project, agricultural producers can apply to receive financial and technical assistance to help NRCS test the conservation benefits and effects of high tunnels in practical, real-world situations. The high tunnel pilot study will help determine possible conservation benefits.

Applications are accepted on a continuous basis; however, each fiscal year has funding pool cut-off dates. This year's cut-off date was March 11.

High tunnels improve plant, water and soil quality, as well as pest and nutrient management. High tunnels can lengthen the time frame for local marketing of produce, which increases sustainability while lowering energy and transportation inputs. An extended growing season and steady income may offer advantages to small, limited resource, and organic farmers. They can also assist producers transitioning to specialty crops.





## More Information

**NRCS Plant Materials Program Community Garden Guide**

[www.plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/pubs/mipmco9407.pdf](http://www.plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/pubs/mipmco9407.pdf)

**The University of Vermont Center for Sustainable Agriculture High Tunnels Manual**

[www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture/hightunnels.html](http://www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture/hightunnels.html)

**HighTunnels.org** - [www.hightunnels.org](http://www.hightunnels.org)

Less than one month later . . .  
March 14, 2011

## Rapides Parish Farmer Gets 6-Week Jump on Planting Vegetable Crop

Early February brought ice storms and bitter cold weather to Rapides Parish, Louisiana. However, by February 22, one local farmer was already planting tomatoes and bell peppers—thanks to high tunnel technology.

On February 22, the temperature outside was a comfortable 69 degrees, but inside Rodney Verzwylt's high tunnel, or hoop house, the temperature was knocking on 90's door. While cold snaps that would harm tender, young vegetable plants were still in

the weather forecast, Verzwylt was able to get a head start on his spring vegetable crop and plant over 260 plants.

"I plan to add cucumbers to the mix in mid-April," said Verzwylt. "I will be taking tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers to market in mid-May—about six weeks ahead of everyone else." Verzwylt sells his vegetables through a local roadside vegetable stand and to friends and neighbors.

He also enjoys them himself. "My vegetables are bigger and better than everyone else's," says Verzwylt with a smile.

This crop is Verzwylt's second high tunnel crop. The high tunnel was constructed in September 2010, and during winter months, he harvested mustard greens, cauliflower, carrots, radishes, kale and broccoli from the high tunnel.



To qualify to participate in the high tunnel pilot project, the applicant must: be an agricultural producer; install the high tunnel(s) on cultivated land which includes existing gardens, irrigated hayland and irrigated pasture; and have raised or sold \$1,000 worth of agricultural products.

During the pilot project, successful applicants will receive about 75 percent of the cost of one or more high tunnel system(s) and related costs. Beginning, socially disadvantaged, and limited resource farmers can receive about 90 percent of the costs.

## Rodney Verzwylt Conservationist

The high tunnel pilot project is offered through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Organic Initiative.