

Rotating Through The Seasons With Tunnels

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Greens and herbs have been over-wintered with great success in the MidAtlantic Region for many years. They are seeded in the fall, covered with floating row covers or left exposed to spend the winter in a dormant state. They go into dormancy by mid-December and begin to regrow in early Spring, giving growers a jolt of early income. Our ocean and bay moderated Zone 7 climate warms our well drained sandy soils allowing our dandelion crop to mature by the end of March while most of the other over-wintered greens are ready by mid-April. They can also be forced for harvest a couple of weeks earlier by covering them with clear plastic or floating row cover.

The lure of being first to market and earning an early cash flow are very appealing to many farmers. There are numerous crops to choose when over-wintering, but the standards have remained the same for many years: spinach and chard, dandelion, plain and curly parsley, and leeks. This early income has become a staple for the serious growers in our region. It is a way to show our purchasers that we are committed to this lifestyle and want to earn their business before someone else does.

Many growers throughout the Northeast and many other regions across the globe have been pushing the envelope and taking things to the next level. I am living testimony of that. Row Covers, Low Tunnels, Field Houses and High Tunnels are currently in use 12 months of the year. I know of growers in upstate New York, Vermont and Maine who have been growing produce year round for many years and making great profits at it.

A year ago, while visiting Marolda Farms in western Atlantic County, Rich Marolda Sr. told me that he could not wait until the first snow fall. I asked if he was ready for a break and he just smiled and said, "When the snow falls and no one has any product but you, you can name your price."

Imagine how much better your selling position is during the peak of this "go local movement" when you always have product. Especially in the middle of the winter when no one has anything to sell, you can name your price!

We have all seen High Tunnels going up for tomato and pepper production. The notion is to be the first to market. Some guys are using them for other crops like specialty eggplant, melons and squash. Most farmers in our region are not even thinking of winter crops, but there is a large gap that can be filled if a grower is willing to push the envelope. A tunnel can be used 12 months of the year and it will make money.

Crops that are over-wintered under floating row covers are perfect candidates for winter tunnel production. If timed correctly you can have a product ready for market when everyone else is shutting down for the season. You might even have time to squeeze in a cover crop before planting summer crops in that tunnel. A good crop rotation will keep earning money all year long.

At JAH'S CREATION Organic Farm I like to keep to a 5 year rotation whenever possible. I have numerous plots set up on 4 tracts of land where I am able to rotate my crops. I often erect Low Tunnels over my crops to help push them along. My Low Tunnels are 4 ft high, 10 ft wide, 95 ft long and span 2 beds which are 3 ft wide. This system is very easy to break down and move from plot to plot between crops. It can be trucked from one tract of land to the next with great ease. It will take the abuse of a wind storm, carry a snow load and is extremely affordable.

I have 1 High Tunnel that is 9 ft high, 28 ft wide, 200 ft long and covers 5 beds which are 3 ft wide. Though this tunnel can be moved around the farm, it takes a lot more effort to move than my Low Tunnels. For this reason it is not as economical to move, so I decided to keep it in one place. I plan to put more High Tunnels up as I can afford them. My plan is to have a High Tunnel in each plot so that I have the ability to mono crop each tunnel and rotate throughout my system. In the mean time I have decided on a rotation throughout my beds in this tunnel.

My tunnels make me money 12 months of the year. I grow my crops according to the seasons and take great pride in the results that I have been getting under these tunnels. My tunnels fend off the winter cold and produce very high quality greens for me in the dead of winter. They shelter my transplants from the cold nights and windy days of spring, giving them a strong start with an early finish. In the summer my crops are protected from the rainy weather which brings in disease. I am able to extend the harvest of my summer crops well into the fall by keeping the soil warm under my tunnels. This all gives me the best opportunity to take advantage of the highest market prices all year long.