

Fresh produce survives winter in a hoop house

Dexter area farmer keeps crops growing year-round in unheated space

BY LISA ALLMENDINGER
News Special Writer

As the snowflakes flew Sunday, about 100 people hiked more than a quarter-mile to view an unheated hoop house where row after row of eatable greens flourished.

The inexpensive greenhouse allows Shannon Brines to offer fresh local produce to area residents year-round.

"It's fascinating," said Jean Gramlich, a master gardener from Rose Township in Oakland County, after touring the unheated tunnel.

"I drove 35 miles to see this," the lifelong gardener said. "I like soil and science and as an active member of the Sierra Club and as a conservation steward, I'm interested in energy issues."

Tucked back on Donovan Road in Webster Township, under a long, opaque building, pac choi, spinach and arugula grew in six distinct rows with narrow walkways in between.

When temperatures approach freezing, Brines adds a "floating row cover that is suspended about a foot above the plants." It's rolled back on sunny days, but otherwise remains in place during the coldest months.

"My main interest and current focus is to provide local, fresh and nutritious food year-round, even during the winter, and to do that primarily using energy supplied naturally by the sun," Brines said.

With the help of family and friends, Brines began building the 30-foot by 96-foot steel frame building in the fall of 2004. The frame is covered by a film with the highest light transmission and heat retention properties on the market, he said.

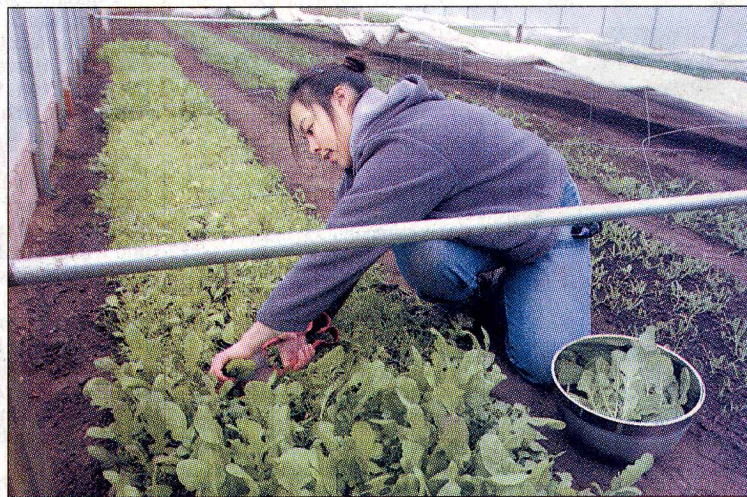
The total cost of the building, about



Shannon Brines grows a variety of produce in the hoop house on his farm in Webster Township, near Dexter. "My main interest and current focus is to provide local, fresh and nutritious food year-round, even during the winter, and to do that primarily using energy supplied naturally by the sun," he said.

\$8,000, has paid for itself in less than two full growing seasons, Brines said.

"I'm interested in sustainability. Food and energy are my main interests, and I want to demonstrate it," the 31-year-old Brines said.



Sabrina Siebert cuts some arugula and claytonia greens from inside Shannon Brines' hoop house Sunday.

Brines has a full-time job as a geographic information systems specialist, and, with the help of family and friends, tends to his hoop house crops on a part-time basis.

"We harvest on Fridays and sell at

the farmers markets on Saturdays," he said.

Although his primary market has been the Ann Arbor Farmers Mar-

SEE HOOP HOUSE, B3

HOOP HOUSE FROM B1

Key is to work with seasons

ket, he said he's also sold his produce at farmers markets in Dexter and downtown Ypsilanti and at Zingerman's Roadhouse in Ann Arbor.

He charges \$3 per bag, a price Laura Morche of Hazel Park was glad to pay.

"This is going to be our lunch with some lemon juice and olive oil," she said.

Morche said her family recently bought 40 acres in northern Michigan and they planned to use solar and wind power to heat and light their new home.

Sabrina Siebert of Ann Arbor, one of Brines' housemates, helps harvest the greens.

"I use sheep shears," she said, pointing to the large shears she'd just placed on a table that had several bowls of greens for tasting.

In the beginning of his second full season of hoop house growing, Brines' winter crops include lettuce, mache, car-

rots, leeks, cress, totsoi, mizuna and kale, with some parsley tucked in between.

With sheep baa-ing outside, the 10-acre site has been the Brines family farm for almost 30 years.

A forest portion close to the road includes maple trees that are tapped for sap. Blueberry and raspberry bushes can be found close to the home of Shannon Brines' parents, Bill and Marlene.

And this is just the first of several hoop houses Brines hopes to build on the property. His next venture, he said, will be a less expensive A-frame one, using black locust trees from the site, local ash lumber and other natural building techniques.

"The key to growing food that can be harvested year-round is to work with the seasons and utilize cold hardy/tolerant plants, particularly for the winter season," he said.