

Winter's Harvest

By Kim Bayer

In a clearing between pine and oak trees, a flock of grazing wild turkeys scatters as Shannon Brines heads toward his hoop house to water his crops. Just a few miles outside of Dexter on the land where he grew up, the 33-year-old part-time farmer grows fresh produce year-round in his solar-powered hoop house. It may be cold outside, but inside a bright patchwork of organically grown greens rises from the loamy soil.

As the sun peeks over the trees, the hoop house heats up, while Brines describes his motivation for taking on the Brines Farm endeavor in addition to his full-time job as a research computer specialist at the University of Michigan. “Right now [the farm] complements my other work, where I’m making maps of food access and maps of surfaces representing health opportunities,” he says. “But I do all that at a desk with digital data and computers. The farming is a nice balance.”

Hoop houses—long tents of fabric stretched over a series of supporting hoops—rely solely on solar input for heat in the winter, and on a sunny winter day the hoop house temperature can easily rise above 70°. In Michigan’s northern climate, hoop houses are generally oriented east-west to gather the most sun so that during the day the soil can absorb enough warmth from the sun to keep the crops from freezing at night. On cloudy days and bitter cold nights, Brines keeps his plants warm with a fabric row cover.

Now in his fourth winter of hoop house farming, Brines is setting an example of how to provide local food year-round in Michigan. “I’ve been thinking about this a long time,” he explains. “I [am] trying to [grow] nutritious food at a time of year when people think they [can’t] get local, fresh, nutritious food.”


Starting in September with staggered plantings of cold-hardy greens,



the hoop house's winter harvest can last until the spring thaw. Brines sells his greens at the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market throughout the winter when the normally busy market dwindles to just a few vendors selling eggs, meat, apples, bread and maple syrup. Consistently sold out by 10 a.m., market shoppers know to arrive early if they want bags of Brines Farm tender mixed salad greens, spinach and arugula.

Shannon Brines has built up a loyal following of customers who come every week looking for his winter greens. The Brines Farm motto of "Know Your Farmer" goes into full effect as he chats with each familiar face. He is justly proud of the colorful salad mix that customers line up to buy with red-tinged Rouge d'Hiver lettuce, green lily pads of Claytonia, succulent komatsuna and tiny purple-leafed Red Russian kale. It is worth the chilly trek down to the farmers' market for the fresh taste of Michigan greens in winter.

The success of Brines Farm and the community's enthusiastic appetite for local food have motivated another Ann Arbor-area farmer to grow winter produce. John Hochstetler of Our Family Farm says he'll be at the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market this winter selling produce like spinach, kale and turnips grown in his two hoop houses on his Manchester farm.

Hoop house farming seems to be a viable option for Michigan. With the money he earned from his one hoop house, Brines ordered the materials for two additional hoop houses. This winter he will add one more hoop house to his farm and by next year, he plans to have all three in operation. "I just want to save the world," Brines says with a twinkle in his eye. "But I also want to have good food doing it. If you're going to save the world you might as well make sure that it tastes good. Otherwise, what are we saving?" 

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Photograph: Kim Bayer