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HOOP DREAMS

Photos by KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press

Shannon Brines, 34, of Ann Arbor grows local produce year-around in three hoophouses on his family farm in Dexter.

Different types of greens and kale grow in a Brines hoophouse.

An insect likes the hoophouse's warm interior temperature.

Baby radishes grow fearlessly, despite what the calendar says.

Learn more about hoophouses

A wealth of information about hoophouses — also called high tunnels or passive solar greenhouses — is available online. Here are a few places to start:

- Michigan State University's Student Organic Farm in Holt offers informal tours. For dates, times and details, see **www.msuorganicfarm.org/tours.htm**.
- MSU outreach specialist Adam Montri shows how hoophouses are built in a YouTube video: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5dyGHurXdA**.
- The USDA, which runs a project to test and promote hoophouse growing, offers a wide range of information, photos and other resources at **www.hightunnels.org**.

- SYLVIA RECTOR

Freep.com **Photo gallery of Brines' hoophouses**

Hoophouse ventures prove that food crops can thrive year-around in Michigan

By **SYLVIA RECTOR**
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Shannon Brines stooped down, pulled a young carrot out of the ground and gently brushed the soil off its roots.

"My customers love to get these," he said, checking his crops one cold, rainy morning last month.

While most Michigan gardeners still haven't bought their vegetable seeds, Brines spent his winter harvesting handfuls of baby carrots and hundreds of pounds of fresh baby lettuce, arugula, spinach, chard, kale and exotic gourmet greens from three unheated hoophouses near Dexter.

Growing produce year-around in Michigan may sound like a global-warming daydream. But entrepreneurs like Brines prove it can be done — profitably — in the low-tech, plastic-covered sheds.

"It could be a living, depending on your definition," says Brines, 34, a University of Michigan data analyst who lives in Ann Arbor. If he focused only on growing, he figures he could make about $40,000 a year.

This past winter, he ran Washtenaw County's first-ever wintertime community-supported agriculture (CSA) group — a contract arrangement in which customers pay an up-front fee for crop shares.

Each week since last fall, his two dozen customers have received shares that have ranged from about 3 pounds of produce during the dead of winter to huge bags of salad and cooking greens this spring, as the daylight hours increased.

At about $25 a week per share, Brines' CSA will generate about $14,000 over its 23-week span. And this summer, he expects to earn additional income selling several kinds of hard-to-find and heirloom vegetables from his stall at the Ann Arbor farmers market.

WHEN HE BUILT his first hoophouse in 2004, they were almost unknown in Michigan. They're still rare. Michigan State University officials estimate there are perhaps 100 scattered around the state.

"Growing food year-round in Michigan is still kind of a crazy concept," says MSU hoophouse outreach specialist Adam Montri, 31, of Bath. "But there's enough people who know it can happen — that it's no longer considered a crazy-off-the-wall, it-can't-happen idea."

Montri works at MSU's Student Organic Farm, whose hoophouses serve as a demonstration site; he leads tours, advises farmers as well as urban growers on hoophouse construction and much more. "We're trying to get as much information and expertise out there as possible, so that people can see how you can make it happen," he says.

The long, white, unheated structures vary in size, but 30-by-96-feet and 13- to 15-feet-high is standard. They require only basic skills to construct, so owners usually do it themselves with help from friends. They're made with a skeletal row of wood, plastic or metal supports covered with tear-resistant plastic that allows light to penetrate.

Operating costs are low because they are not mechanically heated or cooled. The sun warms them, and rolling up the plastic sides allows the heat to escape when it gets too hot. Water is applied by drip-irrigation lines laid beside the crop rows.

ESTIMATES VARY on how long it takes to recoup the $6,000-$12,000 construction costs.

Brines estimates 12-18 months, but Montri is more conservative. In a U.S. Department of Agriculture-funded MSU research project started in 2006, most of the 12 farmers who participated took two to four years to break even, he says.

The best take was $10,500-$11,000 a year. But Montri says an experienced grower might gross $20,000 a year from a standard structure.

"What we're trying *not* to do is say you'll make tons of money," he cautioned. "We want to keep expectations realistic."

Many people interested in hoophouses are nonfarmers looking for extra income or even a new career path, but Montri says agriculture isn't for everyone. "Farming can easily be romanticized. ... We're not saying, 'Don't do it,' but it's like any business: There's the potential to lose money."

On the other hand, he has nothing but optimism about the potential demand for year-round local produce.

"The market is so huge and so wide open, we aren't even close to saturating it. It's enormous," he says.

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