



Photos by MADALYN RUGGIERO/Detroit Free Press

TOP: Shannon Brines, 31, tends to his plants inside his unheated greenhouse. He started his farm in 2005, prompted by worries about food safety.

BELOW: The greenhouse cost \$8,000.

By MARTY HAIR
FREE PRESS GARDEN WRITER

Cynthia Zuccaro of Dexter buys locally grown food whenever she can.

But she couldn't find fresh local salad greens during Michigan's coldest months — until she found Shannon Brines' stall at the Ann Arbor Farmers Market.

Brines grows organic lettuces and spinach throughout the winter inside an unheated greenhouse called a high tunnel or a hoop house.

"Salad greens, mustard greens — whatever he has is something I could eat in a fresh salad," says Zuccaro, 48, who works in the University of Michigan's dental pathology lab.

■ Cold-frame gardening, 2C
■ Tips on buying organic produce, 2C

The appetite for local organic produce appears robust this fall because of September reports of E. coli contamination in bagged spinach from California.

Some niche growers like Brines Farm in Dexter are using high tunnels as a way to continue the growing season indoors.

"It's awesome in January when you have something that tastes so fresh and green," Zuccaro says.

Brines' high tunnel has a wood-and-steel frame covered with two layers of plastic, the air between them adding insulation.

The covering lets in light and holds heat, keeping soil and air warm enough so cold-tolerant plants like lettuce and spinach stay alive and leaves can be picked all winter.

Brines, 31, is a geographic informa-

Dexter gardener uses an unheated greenhouse — or high tunnel — to nurture tender lettuces and spinach, providing fresh local produce even during Michigan's coldest months



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greens

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tion systems specialist who maps things like sprawl at U-M. He's also an organic grower who writes a blog called "Know Your Farmer" on his Web site at www.brines.org.

He says high tunnel production could work for other growers, providing crops and revenue off-season for those in agriculture, Michigan's second largest industry.

Brines calls it "a very viable small business model which has a fairly quick return on investment, even if people had to pay construction labor costs." His farm will be open for tours from 11 to 4 p.m. Nov. 19.

Brines Farm open house

1-4 p.m.
Nov. 19
8218 Donovan
Road
Dexter
www.brines.org
734-330-5630

For a map, go to his Web site.

Virtually unknown just a few years ago, high tunnels are catching on in Michigan with about two dozen already built, according to John Biernbaum, horticulture professor at Michigan State University. Nine new ones this year are part of a project to compare costs, output and revenue generated for existing farms.

Several Macomb County growers are also exploring winter greens production to sell to restaurants and at farmers markets, says Hannah Stevens, horticultural agent with the MSU Extension there.

One high tunnel already in operation is at the Giving Tree Farm in Lansing, where organic manager Sue Houghton says demand for their greens boomed after the contamination reports surfaced.

"We've sold every bit of spinach we could take to the farmers market," Houghton says, with many customers asking



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Shannon Brines also grows bok choy in his greenhouse in Dexter. The chill of winter slows the plants' growth, but Brines can still harvest the leaves.

Tips for buying organic produce

People who sell fresh fruit and vegetables at farm markets are not required to be licensed in Michigan.

However, food grown on a small scale gets close scrutiny and farmers would be held personally accountable if there were to be any problems, says John Biernbaum, MSU horticulture professor and faculty adviser of

the MSU Student Organic Farm. Always wash produce before eating it, recommends Katherine Fedder, who directs the state agriculture department's food and dairy division.

"If you're buying at a farm market from a farmer, I think it's probably safe to say the nutritional advantages ... certainly outweigh the risks," she adds.

- MARTY HAIR

about produce, how it's grown and food safety.

In fact, Brines' own concern about food safety and sustainability prompted him to build the unheated greenhouse. With family and friends, he built the 30-x-96-foot structure on his parents' 10-acre property, not far from where Brines lives in Ann Arbor.

The high tunnel was enclosed in October 2005 and Brines began planting last fall. Soon, he was harvesting far more than he and his family

could eat.

So last December, he began selling at the Ann Arbor Farmers Market. He charges \$3 for 5 to 6 ounces of spinach, which he says is about the same price and size as a plastic supermarket tub.

In the summer, he grows heat-loving crops like tomatoes in the high tunnel and also has a large outdoor garden. In 10 months, Brines says, he has recouped the greenhouse's \$8,000 cost and estimates that annual profits from a high tun-

nel could reach \$10,000 after the cost of seeds and electricity for water and a fan.

That does not include labor, however. Brines spends at least 10 hours a week working in the high tunnel and his parents, Bill and Marlene, also help.

In early October, Brines sowed seeds for the winter crops. By Thanksgiving, the plants will be up.

During the darkest days of winter, the plants won't grow much, but Brines will still be able to pick the leaves. When sunlight intensifies again sometime in February, the plants will resume growing.

Brines is already planning a second high tunnel to handle demand from current customers and new ones, like a local chef.

"He's really interested in getting my arugula but I don't have enough," Brines says.

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