Moving Right Along

High Tunnel Gives Farmers More Flexibility

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Becky Sideman, a vegetable and berry specialist with UNH Cooperative Extension, will use cutting edge technology to assist with crop research and classroom teaching.

During those endless sultry days last June, Rolling Thunder appeared on the crest of the Woodman Horticultural Farm, a facility of the NH Agricultural Experiment Station

(NHAES) at the University of New Hampshire. This particular expansion of rapidly heated air didn't break the brutal cycle of humidity, however, as the only thing it has to do with weather is to buffer crops from nature's extremes and extend the growing season. Rolling Thunder is actually the name of a moveable high tunnel, developed and donated to the University's research farm by Rimol Greenhouse Systems of Hooksett, NH. Their innovative design employs heavy-duty wheels with bearings that glide back and forth over extended rails, allowing for the cultivation of up to three 30' x 48' plots. "Donating a moveable high tunnel to UNH was very important to us," says Bob Rimol, President of Rimol Greenhouse Systems. "It serves as both a resource for crop research and a state-of-the-art classroom for teaching new growing methods."

THE MOVABLE TUNNEL USES HEAVY-DUTY WHEELS WITH BEARINGS THAT GLIDE OVER EXTENDED RAILS.

Specialist in sustainable horticulture Becky Sideman will be teaching some of those new growing methods associated with the Rolling Thunder high tunnel system to students in the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture within UNH. And as a UNH Cooperative Extension professor, Sideman is also thinking about responding to the most important questions on New Hampshire growers' minds. In order to do so, she aims to find out what crops will bring the greatest gains to producers in the region by experimenting with the scheduling of various cropping systems as she slides the tunnel along its tracks throughout the seasons. "With the use of a moveable high tunnel, farmers may not have to make the choice to pull their profitable tomatoes out of the greenhouse early in order to start planting winter greens on time," says Sideman of one of the many benefits of the Rolling Thunder design.

Sideman is known as the vegetable and berry production specialist with UNH Cooperative Extension and conducts her research, which has direct benefits to producers throughout the state, with the support of funding from the NHAES. "Becky's

work is of the highest impact," says Jon Wraith, dean of COLSA and Director of NHAES. "Recently, she determined that growers could increase income by more than $10,000 by switching from lower to higher yielding tomato varieties. We can trust her research to bring concrete results that affect the horticultural industry in our region, and we are grateful to Rimol Greenhouse Systems for their additional support of her efforts."

"The moveable high tunnel is a great educational component for my work with growers," says Sideman. "They can drop by and see it in action, but we'll also have a formal informational tours during Twilight Meetings." Rimol's donation is a boon to both Sideman's research and the producers who will benefit from the information she'll generate. "Rimol has been very supportive of this research throughout the region, donating moveable high tunnels to a few different universities with extension programs," says Sideman. "At Woodman Farm, we now have two high tunnels from manufacturers right here in New Hampshire that sell nationally," she says, referring to Rimol Greenhouses and Ledgewood Farm in Moultonborough. "High tunnel growing started in New Hampshire with my predecessor, Otho Wells," says Sideman. "He began by designing low tunnels and row covers and made them bigger and bigger until he could finally work inside."

This fall, graduate student Connor Eaton will join Sideman in her research, bringing his experience with cropping systems and an interest in small diverse farms to the projects. In addition, organic farmer and four-season farm specialist for Rimol Greenhouses, Clara Coleman, will be using the moveable high tunnel on Woodman Farm as a backdrop to inspire farmers who seek to increase their own growing seasons in the Northeast. Coleman will be working with Rimol Greenhouse Systems to produce informational videos that will ultimately help farmers with their knowledge of growing in the Rolling Thunder greenhouses. "The donation from Rimol Greenhouse Systems will help many people with research, teaching, and overall growing," says Rimol. "The long term benefits will not only help people in New Hampshire, but all over the New England region."

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