High tunnels—fooling mother nature

The Situation
The vagaries of Idaho’s weather have frustrated home gardeners and small acreage growers for many years. Several areas of Idaho struggle to grow gardens due to lack of sufficient growing days without frost damaging the crops they want to grow. Cold soils preclude early planting of many crops. Untimely frosts are common. Those that grow for Farmers Markets and niche markets are challenged to compete with growers from out of the area that have better growing conditions. Many gardeners also struggle with controlling wildlife damage to their gardens.

Our Response
Research from several different universities suggest that high tunnels are a very effective way to extend the growing season. It was decided to build a low cost high tunnel to demonstrate their possibilities in our area. The Bonneville County Fair Board was contacted about the idea and they agreed to allow us to place the high tunnel on the fairgrounds. A Saturday early in April was chosen to hold a high tunnel raising and the community was invited to participate. Materials were purchased and the land was prepared beforehand. Saturday morning over 70 members of the community were anxious and eager to assist in the construction. After a short classroom instruction period we assembled in the parking lot, and about 5 hours later the high tunnel was up and ready to plant. The finished high tunnel is 40 feet long and 14 feet wide. The cost of construction was approximately $500.00.

Program Outcomes
Several of the participants of the high tunnel construction class built their own personal high tunnels. Some growers are now able to market produce at local farmers markets earlier than those that growing without high tunnels. Harvestable amounts of lettuce and spinach are ready in March. Ripe tomatoes are being picked in June. Not only are crops earlier, and maintained later in the season, but crop quality is improved. Varmint issues are decreased with crops grown in the high tunnels. The demonstration high tunnel continues to be visited several times a month. High tunnel classes at local nursery outlets are very popular, and some years a second session is needed due to demand. Currently research is being conducted to determine the possibility of growing crops not generally grown in the area as well as engineering high tunnels to better withstand weather conditions common to Idaho.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
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