

Why Buy Hoops When You Can Bend Them Yourself?

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Making hoops for grow tunnels is fast and easy with a tube bender from Lost Creek Greenhouse. Loy Robinson has been using plastic-covered hoop houses for years. Instead of buying commercial hoops, he makes his own at 1/10 the cost using low cost benders he designed and now markets direct.

"I was selling hoop house kits and had bought a \$12,000 electric bender, but it worked too slow," recalls Robinson. "I was taking a break and noticed two of the bent pipes stacked on each other and realized that if they were fastened down they'd make a great jig. I bolted them down and tried it out. It worked great."

Today Robinson markets three pipe bender series, each with jigs for 10, 12, and 20-ft. dia. hoops. He also makes a 24-ft. dia. jig in one series. The difference between each series is the surface size of the arc, ranging from 24 in. with the DY Series to the 48-in. C Series and the 126-in. F Series. The larger the arc, the fewer motions needed to complete the hoop. All three series are designed for use with 1 3/8-in. O.D. chain link fence top rail, though the suggested gauge varies.

Prices range from \$59.99 for a DY series to \$129.99 for a C Series and \$299.99 for an F Series bender. Prices are the same for all models within a series.

"The DY is the least expensive bender, but the C Series is our workhorse," says Robinson. "All three work great. Just visit our eBay site. It's loaded with customer comments."

The design is largely unchanged from his first inspiration. Two tubes in the desired arc are bolted together in a stacked position. A retainer at one end holds the pipe in place as it's bent around and between the stacked tubes of the bender. The bender is bolted to any horizontal or vertical surface that allows room for the pipe to be bent from a straight position.

Robinson also makes a bender for 4-ft. and 6-ft. dia. hoops made with 10 1/2-ft. lengths of electrical conduit. The hoops make it easy to create low tunnel, bed-sized greenhouses.

Eliot Coleman is a market gardener, author and proponent of year-round gardening using low tunnels. He has endorsed Robinson's Quick Hoops Bender. While low tunnel hoops can be made from PVC pipe and even black plastic pipe, Coleman points out that neither will stand up to a heavy winter snowfall like metal conduit will.



FARM SHOW tested Robinson's simple method of bending hoops to make 4-ft. garden row covers. Bender bolts onto any horizontal or vertical surface that allows room for pipe to be bent from a straight position.



Hoops covered by fabric, left, protect late-season plantings. Robinson pipe benders can also be used to make greenhouses or "high tunnels" up to 24 ft. wide.

Robinson gave FARM SHOW a Quick Hoops Bender so we could see for ourselves how it works.

The bender was bolted to a 4 by 8 sheet of plywood and laid between the wheel wells of a Chevy S10 pickup truck. Robinson advised that the plywood would quickly bind against the wheel wells as the bender was used, creating a stable work surface.

A 10 1/2-ft. length of 1/2-in. electrical conduit was inserted about 16 in. through the retainer. The conduit was simply walked around the bender. The process was then repeated with the other end inserted in the retainer. When the conduit was pulled away from the bender, it was a perfect hoop with 16-in. sidewalls and a 4-ft. dia. arc.

The hoops were set over a 4-ft. wide raised bed and pushed into the soil on either side.

Initially the bed, with winter greens and beets planted to it, will be covered with Reemay row cover for frost protection. Come spring, the low tunnels will be used to protect an early season planting from frost. By late spring, only the row cover will be needed.

All three series of benders are available directly from Robinson. The smaller Quick Hoops Bender is offered exclusively through Johnny's Seeds in either 4 ft. or 6 ft. diameter configurations (ph 877 564-6697; www.johnnyseeds.com).

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Lost Creek Greenhouse Systems, 245 C.R. 2651, Mineola, Texas, 75773 (ph 903 569-8541; herbs@lostcreek.net; www.lostcreek.net; eBay site: tippergoat).

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