

## High Tunnels Boost Tomato Harvest

Todd Griggs considered himself a conventional market garden farmer until he purchased a 21 by 48-ft. high tunnel in 2010. When plants in the high tunnel produced 18 lbs. of quality tomatoes compared to 4 lbs. in the field, the Augusta, Kan., farmer recognized an opportunity to grow his business.

"You can control every bit of water and micrometer the fertilizer. Tomatoes always come out of the house shiny and healthy," Griggs says.

Plants still grow in the ground inside the high tunnels, which require manual ventilation – rolling the sides up or down. With frost blankets, plants can be started as early as Feb. 15, with tomatoes ready to harvest by the third week in May.

The early start eliminates some pest problems, and shade cloths can be used to reduce heat stress, Griggs notes. While he has had losses in the high tunnels from large hail, the plastic protects plants in most weather, including small hail.

"Pea-size hail that will decimate a crop

in the field doesn't bother the houses at all," Griggs says.

Since putting up that first tunnel, the Kansas vegetable grower has added larger 30 by 96-ft. high tunnels. By the end of the year he will have 11 structures. He notes that he is able to grow two crops of tomatoes in them per season. He also grows tomatoes in the field to fill in the gap between crops.

Other vegetables do well in high tunnels, but Griggs focuses on high value tomatoes, which he sells at farmers markets and to roadside markets and other vendors.

"It's a sizable investment of money and time. The time investment is what people need to look at," he emphasizes. "You have to monitor them morning and night and shut them when a storm is coming. I advise people to buy the largest and sturdiest-built tunnel you can afford."

Griggs uses tunnels made by Poly-Tex ([www.poly-tex.com](http://www.poly-tex.com); ph 800 852-3443) and Zimmerman ([www.zimmermanshightunnels.com](http://www.zimmermanshightunnels.com); ph 414 916-9873). The investment and time pays off with more produce to market



Photo courtesy Kansas State University Extension

**Todd Griggs purchased this 21 by 48-ft. high tunnel in 2010 and since then has added larger 30 by 96-ft. tunnels. "Tomatoes always come out of the tunnels shiny and healthy," he says.**

for a longer time - almost until Thanksgiving last year for Griggs.

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## From Potatoes To Tomatoes, Veggie Washer Does It All

Riverside Industries' vegetable washer is tough enough to handle dirty potatoes and carrots yet gentle enough to wash tomatoes, green beans and thin skinned summer squash. It even de-silks sweet corn without damaging the kernels.

"There's nothing else out there like it," says John Waldner, Riverside Industries. "Other washers are good for certain kinds of vegetables. Ours works well with all types."

At 68 in. long and 22 in. wide, the washer has a small footprint. It weighs 480 lbs. and can be equipped with a 1/3 hp. electric motor, gas engine or hydraulic motor. The spray heads use household water pressure and jet nozzles to rinse away dirt and plant residue. The 3-ft. height makes it handy to fill and empty the 18-in. dia., 60-in. long drum.

The drum is lined with outdoor carpet

to prevent bruising and to help scrub away dirt. However, it is the incline of the drum that controls how aggressive the washer is. The filler end of the drum can be raised as much as 11 in. or lowered to only 5 in. above level. The steeper the incline, the more the vegetables are tossed around.

"At its steepest, it can clean 75 to 80 lbs. of potatoes in a minute and a half," says Waldner. "Simply reduce the incline for more tender vegetables like tomatoes. When the drum is nearly flat, they don't toss at all."

A door on the unloading end of the drum controls how long produce is exposed to the water and rotation of the drum. Waldner explains that the door is left open for tomatoes and other vegetables requiring less aggressive cleaning.

The vegetable washer is built to last. Even the carpet is durable. "We've been marketing



**Riverside Industries' vegetable washer works well with all types of vegetables, and can even de-silk sweet corn without damaging the kernels.**

the washer for about 4 years and have prototypes that have been out for 5 years, and still have the same carpet," says Waldner.

Riverside Industries' vegetable washer is priced at \$5,280 plus shipping.

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## His Farm Has Evolved Into School For Teens

After decades of entertaining families with children, touring school groups and employing young people, a Wisconsin farmer is dedicating his farm to education. The School at Altenburg's Farm is a dream come true for 84-year old owner Harold Altenburg.

"I've seen firsthand the positive impact that farm experiences can have on young people, particularly teens," says Altenburg. "I envision the farm school to be a place for kids to grow through fun, hands-on learning that will enable them to value and appreciate the role of agriculture in their lives, possibly as a career."

For 50 years, Altenburg's 42-acre farm has provided fruits, vegetables and entertainment to the central Wisconsin community of Wisconsin Rapids. It is the place to go pick strawberries in the early summer and to get pumpkins, Indian corn, squash and more in the fall.

When Incurage, a local Wisconsin Community Foundation, first sponsored a community picnic, Altenburg showed up with 1,000 ears of sweet corn. This past summer he donated 4,000 ears. Now the

foundation is paying him back by helping make his farm school a reality.

"He came to us with his vision," says Gus Mancuso, Incurage. "We knew it wouldn't happen unless the community wanted the farm to continue."

Initially the foundation tried to find a lead farmer and develop a plan. This past winter they sponsored a series of public meetings to discuss the idea and encourage community involvement.

The first meeting attracted 135 people. The foundation shared Altenburg's hope to provide a place for students to learn by doing and get credit for what they learned. They also invited members of the community to join an advisory board, help find prospects to manage the farm, and volunteer in other ways.

"One piece of the effort was fundraising to cover input costs, insurance etc.," says Mancuso. "Our foundation is putting up \$25,000 as a matching grant for other contributors. We are also reviewing finalists for a farm/school manager and developing a lease."

Mancuso acknowledges that this is just the



**Wisconsin farmer Harold Altenburg is dedicating his farm to education for young people. "It's a place for kids to grow through fun, hands-on learning," he says.**

beginning. Phase two will include developing a school agenda and work curriculum. Altenburg and his family aren't simply signing over the farm to the foundation. They will continue to be involved through a mechanism that will maintain the lease as long as Harold's vision is maintained.

While Incurage is only active in the local community, Mancuso is eager to share what

they are doing, should others be interested in a similar effort. Contributions to School at Altenburg's Farm are also welcome.

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