Impressions from Chuck and Barb Schulstad interview  

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_Curiosity changes retirement plans_

Their adventure began six years ago and refuses to stop. For this retired Woodside Township couple, it started with curiosity.

A few years after leaving their longtime teaching jobs with the Fargo area schools, Barb and Chuck Schulstad became Polk County Master Gardeners. While taking the required core course through the University of Minnesota Extension, the couple became intrigued by high tunnel agricultural practices and how they could extend the growing season for certain crops. This was especially interesting for Chuck, a man who likes his tomatoes, peppers and other vegetables fresh, local and- ideally- available year round. But how so in such a northern climate?

The Schulstads had entered retirement with the idea they’d move to Chuck’s century family farm, use about a third of its 160 acres for corn and soybeans, grow some fruit and vegetables for their own consumption and continue their U-pick raspberry patch operation that welcomed both local residents and nearby resort and cabin visitors. Given the midsummer timing of the raspberry crowds, and with his introduction to high tunnels, Chuck began to wonder whether small crop production in such a structure might yield a harvest that could coincide with their raspberry business and thereby meet increasing customer requests for vegetables.

In the fall of 2007, after much study, hands-on examination and consultation with experienced farmers and U of MN high tunnel expert, Terry Nennich, the duo took the plunge and invested in high tunnel number 1. They thought it would be “fun and exciting”, even as they wondered whether it would withstand the winter blizzards and spring winds. The structure did survive the elements, and by the end of the first season, the pair said, “the reality of the harvest far-exceeded” their expectations. They had had such an abundance that even Barb’s industrious canning could not keep up.

At about the same time they were relishing their bumper crop and figuring out a next step, the first farmers’ market in the area was being developed in Mentor. They were approached about joining the effort and selling their produce there the next year, and, grateful for this “wonderful coincidence,” the Schulstads jumped on the opportunity, starting immediately as produce vendors.

Life got even more interesting when, in 2010, Nennich asked if they’d supervise a four year research project growing small fruits in a high tunnel on their property. Having worked together on the earlier
structure, they said yes, and soon high tunnel number 2 was built to study whether blueberries, not native to Minnesota soils, could be produced in amended soil inside the structure. Raspberries, honeyberries, blackberries and strawberries would also be grown. Currently, at the halfway point of the project and having experienced long stretches of atypically mild and dry weather, Barb reports that the “high tunnel and control blueberry specimens are running neck and neck,” and Nennich observes that all crops have exceeded expectations so far. Two more years may tell more.

Participating in this research has required diligence and discipline. Aside from soil preparation, planting, weeding and watering, the Schulstads also check for and address disease, insect and “varmint” issues and record growth and harvest data. In addition, they host dozens of field days, tours, seminars and other public events so others may learn firsthand about high tunnel farming. Chuck and Barb enjoy these opportunities to interact with others and offer their learnings and observations. They've also credited Terry for his careful and insightful guidance, while Nennich lauds the Schulstads for their dedication.

As if two structures and small fruit research were not enough, in 2011 the duo, again with the U’s expert, constructed a third high tunnel, this time to experiment with growing apple trees. Nennich hypothesized that the wind may be more the obstacle than the cold for growing apples in northern Minnesota, and he wondered whether high tunnels might provide a useful risk management tool as well as a means for farmers to increase their income, given the popularity of fresh apples. So, Barb and Chuck, under Terry’s tutelage, planted 45 University-developed Honeycrisp and Zestar apple trees, spacing them 3 feet apart and pruning them as Nennich had observed in Europe. They also planted plum and sour cherry trees. To date, Barb and Chuck report all specimens are doing well; while last winter’s mild weather was not a real test, the apple trees measured close to 5 years’ growth after only a single growing season. Barb and Chuck expect more may be revealed after this winter.

So why would two folks who had long, full careers, retire and then sign on to what Chuck says is like “having a herd of dairy cows”? He offers, “It’s changed our lives and has enriched us. We love staying on the farm because it’s broadening and exciting. We had not anticipated all that it has provided.” He acknowledges, too, the role of the agricultural community and other farmers, the Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership and the University for providing considerable support and encouragement that has helped make this all possible. For additional information about high tunnel production and opportunities, folks are encouraged to contact Terry Nennich or go to hightunnels.cfans.umn.edu.

This article was written by Barbara Grossman for the Regional Partnership’s newsletter Jan 2013. Click here to return to project page.