

Four Seasons Gardening

by Sarah Edmonds



One of the downsides of gardening in Flagstaff is the short growing season. According to the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, the typical growing season for summer crops lasts only 103 days. On average, our last spring frost date is June 9, and our first fall frost occurs on September 24. Of course, those dates vary. Our summer vegetables may last a bit longer, depending on which neighborhood we live in and whether or not we use water jugs and sheets to protect them from the cold for a few extra days.

But the sheet method can be a hassle. Gardeners rush out at dusk to cover plants and then remove the coverings the next morning. After

enough seasons of last-minute scrambling, patience wears thin and frustration grows. Gardeners begin to ask: isn't there a better way?

That's when gardeners consider investing in season extenders to protect plants from the cold. They also have additional benefits, such as reducing high-elevation ultraviolet exposure, protecting plants from hail and wind damage, and deterring wildlife encroachments and insect invasions.

Durable season extenders built for our Flagstaff environment are the specialty of Steady Harvest, a company founded in 2023 by Nick Zachary and Finn Bingham. They design and build season extenders such as high tunnels, greenhouses, and roll-up raised bed covers called MiniTunnels. Any of these options extends the growing season about one month on both sides of the 103-day frost free window. Zachary, the current owner, says, "This is something people here really need and are passionate about. Until now, there hasn't been a local company making these kits. If you order one from out of state, the shipping costs alone could be thousands of dollars, and it may not hold up in our climate."

Some season extenders constructed with flimsy plastic covers and tubing can collapse under snow load, fall apart from high winds, and disintegrate under high UV sunlight. To prevent these problems, Steady Harvest uses galvanized steel tubing and a reinforced polyethylene cover in their structures. They can withstand winds up to 115 mph and 70 pounds per square foot of snow.

Their MiniTunnel is unique enough to be patent pending. Why? "The concept of roll-up sides, common on larger high tunnel designs, has never been used on a raised bed covering," Zachary explained. "Our newest iteration also makes the steel frame of the covering an integral

part of the raised bed itself, which all bolts together with ease.” Both sides of the covering can be rolled up with hand cranks and set at varying heights to control ventilation and temperature, while still protecting plants from hard rains and hail. The frustrating sheet method is replaced by a few easy seconds of rolling the sides up or down, and growers can rest assured their plants are protected all year long, for years to come.

Moreover, Zachary gives advice on navigating a tough financial climate by encouraging growers to apply for a partial reimbursement through the USDA. Their Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) helps offset the cost of high tunnels, because of the proven benefits for soil health. This not only makes high tunnels more affordable, it also strengthens local food production.

“There are ways to grow year-round. We refer people to the Four Seasons Method,” Zachary said, referring to the system developed by Eliot Coleman, a Maine farmer. His books such as “The New Organic Grower” and “The Winter Harvest Handbook” have become classics. Zachary notes that using a low tunnel with frost cloth inside of a high tunnel will allow greens to grow through the winter.

“It’s really gratifying to see people succeed,” Zachary said. “We built a 20’ x 20’ high tunnel in Doney in May, and when I checked back in on the growers in September, it was overflowing with cucumbers, tomatoes, and eggplants—things they only had marginal success growing outside before.” Beyond productivity, these structures also bring joy. “One of our customers said, you aren’t just selling greenhouses or season extenders, you’re selling a happy place,” Zachary

recalled. Zachary offers free consultations in the Flagstaff area to help gardeners imagine what their own little plant oasis could look like. For more information, visit www.Steady-Harvest.com.

Sarah Edmonds earned a Home Horticulture Certificate from the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension in 2024.