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Garden Goddess Enterprises a growing success

Carol Ford and Chuck Waibel use a low-cost greenhouse to produce greens and other, cold-tolerant vegetables by the bushel basket through the winter for the tables of 18 families. The two entrepreneurs have published a 176-page book that tells how they do it.

Producing greens and vegetables by the bushel basket through the course of a Minnesota winter — and paying no more than \$75 in heating bills to do it — is an attention-getting feat.

So much so that Carol Ford and Chuck Waibel, founders and owners of Garden Goddess Enterprises of Milan, have become speakers in demand whenever the topic is local food production or food security.

They've been featured at conferences across the border in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and Winnipeg, Manitoba, and just about everywhere in the Midwest: Gatherings in places as far flung as Bismarck, N.D., to Lacrosse, Wis., have made the husband and wife entrepreneurial team their featured guests.

And, that says nothing about the phone calls, e-mails and letters they receive at their home in Milan from addresses 200 miles either side of the U.S.-Canadian border.

"A lot of people want to know how we did what we did," said Waibel.

They're about to tell us.

The two are publishing a 176-page book "The Northlands Winter Greenhouse Manual" that offers easy-to-follow instructions for replicating their low-tech greenhouse and unique, community supported agriculture venture. The folksy, conversational book also offers ideas on how to turn a love for winter gardening into a community supported agriculture venture, and make a little money.

The couple built a small, 16-foot by 22-foot greenhouse onto the garage of their home in Milan in 2006. Small ventilation fans, low-cost plastic piping and pebbles allow them to take advantage of the greenhouse effect. The heat of the sun is used to warm stones in a four-foot deep, insulated foundation below the greenhouse.

Only the very coldest of winter nights is a propane heater called on to help warm the enclosure.

Sounds easy enough, but Waibel said they receive lots of calls from people who have tried to do the same without success.

The technological answers are easy. Waibel insists that the model they developed is all based on

technology readily available since the 1970s.

But like all kinds of farming, it gets complicated once the crops are growing. Ford is the master gardener of the two, and she has devised the best selection and sequence of plantings for a winter environment. There are essentially three winter “seasons,” she writes, based on the changing hours of sunlight.

The greenhouse is devoted to plants that like what she calls “cold feet.” Broccoli, Chinese cabbage, beets, lettuce and all manner of greens can thrive in a properly managed, but cool greenhouse eco-system.

It’s also possible to keep the system in balance and the bugs and disease problems at bay, and the manual’s authors offer lots of advice on how to do it.

The couple started Garden Goddess Enterprises as a community supported agriculture business in 2006. For an annual fee, they provide vegetables from the greenhouse to 18 families in the Milan area every week from October through April. Ford also raises a variety of vegetables outdoors in the summer that store well. She supplements the weekly, winter deliveries of fresh greens with everything from squash to cabbage.

Waibel said they have been surprised by all of the interest that their venture has created. They have come to realize that the interest goes well beyond a desire for fresh and tasty green vegetables during the gloomy days of winter.

Many who come to hear them speak are interested in promoting local production of food. They are looking for ways to reduce our carbon footprint and make local communities more self-sustaining, and less reliant on oil used to transport foods, said Waibel.

He said many also appreciate the small-scale and affordability of their venture. The couple said they would like nothing better than to see small greenhouses like theirs pop up in neighborhoods all over the country.

As for their own operation, the two are thinking it might be time to expand. Waibel said that they have been developing a network of other local food producers in the region.

The couple is looking at ideas to possibly develop a larger greenhouse and central storage to build a local foods system serving the area.

That is, if they can keep away from the computer. Their first book only tells about one-third of what they wanted to say, said Waibel. If this first book goes as well as hoped, there might be a second in the making.

The West Central Regional Development Partnership helped make the book possible. Funding support provided the assistance of book editor Ann Delgehausen and a selection of photographs by Kristi Link Fernholz.

Ford and Waibel will be launching a Web site at www.gardengoddessenterprises.com and plan book signing events in the Montevideo and Willmar areas later this summer.