



A small farmer extends his season

by [Bridget Macdonald](#)

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Despite the cold January weather, Mike Bollinger removed his coat, gloves and hat before checking on his crops.

The thermostat registered a steamy 80 degrees within the 1,248-square-foot greenhouse in a western Chicago suburb, where a green and purple patchwork of miniature fields sprawled over wooden pallets.

From November through April, Bollinger uses five enclosures to extend his growing season beyond the fall harvest, and get a jump start on planting before the spring thaw.

“On an acre and a half, we are hoping to gross \$120,000,” Bollinger said. Depending on cultivation techniques, he said, “Most farmers are getting that on five or six acres.”

Fruits and vegetables produced for the fresh market generate a significantly larger profit than those sold in the processed market, said Mark Schleusener, a statistician with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Growers can get a better price for fresh products because harvesting typically requires hand picking and demand is consistently strong, he said.

As Bollinger has come to realize by selling at local markets, the payoff is even greater during the winter. At the January opening of Chicago’s Green City Market in January, Bollinger sold out of 60 pounds of spinach within the first hour. At \$7 per half-pound bag, Bollinger saw an \$840 yield on greens alone. “When you’re the only one there with anything green, that’s a market where anything I can grow, I can sell,” he said. When Bollinger and his wife Katie Prochaska moved to Heritage Prairie Farm in fall 2007, they confronted a challenge endemic to small farmers: sustaining economic growth on a limited amount of land. Although the farm encompasses six acres in the town of Elburn, Ill., Bollinger said the most they are able to grow on is two. Every square foot counts, so he and his wife were determined to get the most from every inch.

Standing amidst plots of sprouting greens, which he sells to local restaurants, Bollinger refuted the common assumption about his line of work. “A lot of people say you can’t make money farming, but if you do it efficiently, you can make it work,” he said, adding that he wants to demonstrate how small-scale farming can provide a sustainable lifestyle. “You can build a family this way,” said Bollinger, who has a 9-month-old son with Prochaska. “You can raise kids and do well.”

The key, he said, is to mitigate the seasonal restrictions on when and how much a person can grow. Although greenhouses have been used for centuries, the moveable structures Bollinger uses add a crucial dynamic to his operation. “In a traditional, non-moveable house, you produce one crop,” he said. “With each hoop house, we get four.”



Bridget Macdonald/MEDILL

The four moveable greenhouses farm manager Mike Bollinger built at Heritage Prairie Farm, in Elburn have allowed him to extend his growing season into the cold winter months.



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Bollinger indicated the size of the spinach leaves he sold at Chicago’s Green City Market on Jan. 17.

Come Sunday, Bollinger will plant a new crop of spinach in one of his four hoop houses. The metal-framed structures, covered with greenhouse plastic and set on a pair of rail tracks, keep the enclosed soil warm through simple solar radiation. The spinach will germinate, grow, and be hearty enough to tolerate cold by April 1, at which point the structure will be moved to the next position. Bollinger said it takes four people just one hour to jack up the house and slide it forward to the next plot of earth, which can immediately be planted with a subsequent crop.

California produces the glut of fresh market vegetables in the United States, accounting for 49 percent of the national total. In Illinois, the climate is too harsh to support a robust fresh vegetable industry, so most growers focus on cash crops like grains. But Bollinger has found a niche supplying to farmers markets and restaurants where there is specific demand for local produce throughout the year.

Bollinger attributed his success to Eliot Coleman, a farmer from Harborside, Maine, whom Bollinger said has dedicated his career to developing low-tech solutions for small operations. However, Bollinger is one of only a few growers who have pioneered use of Coleman’s model. “Maybe a dozen farms in the country are doing this,” he said.

But with the increasing demand for local, fresh, nutritious food, Bollinger thinks moveable greenhouses will gain popularity, especially since they can function in both urban and rural settings. Through his company, Four Season Tools, Bollinger plans to provide additional tools tailored for small operations.

“On a large scale farm, there are tons of mechanisms designed to make operations more efficient,” said Bollinger. “Small farmers need to have tools that match their operations.” For example a crop harvester typically costs about \$7,000 and is more suitable for a large tract of land. Small farmers should be able to get smaller machine with a lower capacity for closer to \$200, he said.

Although he admitted that farming is labor intensive, difficult work, Bollinger said it is primarily about problem solving and that the field is fertile with opportunities for progress. “This is where it’s at,” he said, “and people are ready.”



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Rows of sprouting greens epitomize the nature of small farming. Bollinger sells his miniature crops to local restaurants throughout the year.