

## The Madison Farm to Fork Project

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Recently I visited in Ennis, Montana to attend a presentation to the Madison Gardeners by members of the Madison Farm to Fork (MF2F) project. On this sunny, chilly, fall day, we stood inside an unfinished hoop greenhouse on a high bench overlooking the Ennis Hot Spring. MF2F, a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide fresh local food and to support sustainable agriculture, was formed two years ago.

It is utterly amazing what this group has accomplished so far. In addition to \$60,000 from grant money, individuals in the community are contributing money and labor for the project. This is truly an effort involving the entire community of Ennis. Most of the work has been volunteered—from back hoe excavation to erecting the frames to writing grants.

MF2F started by organizing a Farmers' Market, now in its second year. Since there are so few market growers in the area, the supply of locally grown produce has been limited. It just made sense to expand the awareness of what can be grown in the Ennis and surrounding areas. More market gardeners are needed to help supply, locally grown food.

The second phase of the project includes building geo-thermally heated greenhouses for vegetable production and teaching. In a climate such as Ennis where the wind blows a good deal of the time and temperatures can fall well below freezing, heating the greenhouses is a real issue. For this reason the greenhouses are located near a natural hot water artesian spring that supplies 50 gallons of hot water at 190 degrees F, per hour, year round.

This hot water will be used to heat the greenhouses, by passing through a heat exchange system. The hot mineral water once heated a rose growing

operation, but failed because the pipes eroded due to the toxicity of the water. Thus the need to use fresh well water heated with the heat exchanger and an extensive pumping system.

The plastic pipes carrying the water to the greenhouses lies buried four feet deep with insulation underneath. In the greenhouse, the floor was dug four feet deep. A layer of sand was laid down then covered with insulation on which pipes were laid. Heat then will rise to ground level and above. All the growing will be done in raised beds, to increase the distance of plant roots from the heated pipes, to around five feet.

The huge production greenhouse covers a space of about 100 by 50 feet, with that much again left exposed. The greenhouse frames came from the now out-of-business State Nursery in Helena. Since all organic growing methods will be used, the greenhouse building itself will be moved every couple of years to allow the “used” soil to be exposed to the elements, thereby controlling pests—bugs and fungi. The structure has wheels and rests on tracks to facilitate the moving. Also special care will be used to anchor the plastic coverings to prevent them from blowing away.

The third part of the project, and perhaps the most important, is the educational component. MF2F is partnering with the Ennis School system to involve children in programs focused on food, through in-classroom study and hands-on experiences in the greenhouse. Working with the school—the administration, the lunch room staff and the teachers—the leaders in the Farm 2 Fork Project are planning educational workshops for the kindergarten through fifth grade classes. There will be opportunities for the children to plant, tend the crops and harvest the produce. The cafeteria staff will use the fresh produce. The greenhouse will be in operation this fall, with lettuce being planted for use at the

school this winter. When in full operation, a different vegetable will be featured every month.

The MF2F project will benefit everyone, helping to restore sustainable agriculture to a rural community, and by establishing a model for others to follow. In the coming years classes, workshops and hands-on experiences are planned for the adult population, as well.

For more information concerning the progress of the project or to volunteer time or donate money, contact Cindy Owings at [petunias@3rivers.net](mailto:petunias@3rivers.net) or Jim Patrick at 682-3728, [jpatrick@3rivers.net](mailto:jpatrick@3rivers.net).