

MINI-FARMING

Gardening ranks as one of America's top pastimes, but it can be much more than a hobby. Today you can create a full-time livelihood without owning acres of land. A few acres is all you need to grow herbs, sprouts, mushrooms, edible flowers and specialty vegetables and fruits such as squash blossoms, white beets, blue fingerling potatoes, white asparagus and yellow sugar baby watermelons in urban and suburban areas. In fact, minifarming is becoming an important part of agriculture in America. Charles Walters Jr., publisher of Acres magazine, says, “The only bright future in agriculture is to get a few acres, grow the product and be near where the people are.” Walters advises, “Find yourself a couple of hundred customers and make yourself a living.”

Over the past 30 years, Americans have developed a robust appetite for exotic, healthy and unusual foods. They are looking for colorful ingredients, new flavorings, organically grown produce and ethnic specialties. As a result, restaurants, upscale grocery stores, health-food stores, gourmet shops and mainstream supermarkets are increasingly offering specialty foods to their customers. Meanwhile, the public is seeking out specially grown foods, flowers, herbs and condiments at farmers’ markets, swap meets, produce stands and country shops.

The sale of organic foods has been doubling every three and a half years since 1990 [dairy product sales are doubling every one and a half years-KH], despite the fact they are

usually priced at a premium, typically selling for 20% to 100% more than nonorganically grown foods. The popularity of farmers' markets has been a particular boon to minifarmers. People growing the perfect lettuce or tomato often can charge more than supermarkets and have buyers standing in line. In fact, unusual items that a supermarket produce buyer won't touch may sell like wildfire at a farmers' market because they are different. Organic farmers in particular are benefiting from farmers' markets because supermarkets don't carry enough organic products to satisfy the one in ten Americans who seek them out.

Other popular items include herbs used in cooking, teas, medicines, condiments (e.g. specialty vinegars and mustards), perfumes and aromatherapy, as well as oat grass to help the digestion of household cats. There's also a growing market for decorative or aromatic flowers, as well as heirloom varieties of vegetables and fruit whose seeds are passed down through generations.

Robyn and Robert Rohlfing live in Plymouth, Nebraska, where they are successful organic herb producers. They market most of their herbs locally and have had the same clients for nine years. Robyn explains that of all the herbs used in the United States for cooking and medicinal purposes, only 10% of them are grown in this country.

Even if you don't live in a temperate climate, you can still be in this business by growing flowers, herbs or produce in a greenhouse. Greenhouse nurseries have become

the sixth largest source of agricultural commodities in the U.S. as the interest in tropical plants, trees (for woody ornamentals) and medicinal herbs has created a year-round demand. Greenhouse expert Ted Taylor also points to the popularity of 'juicers' as another reason to be in the greenhouse business, growing organic fruits and vegetables to feed the juicer craze. Whether your love is garlic or ginger, mushrooms or marigolds, oregano or blood oranges, there's probably a way for you to turn your love of food and flowers into a new career or just some extra cash.

Knowledge and Skills

A love of food or for growing things is essential to keep you motivated through the entire learning process. Growing produce, herbs or flowers is part art and part science, and mistakes are costly. You need to have knowledge of plants, growing patterns, plant disease, insects, fertilizers and many other fields. You must be sensitive to market needs and demands, to what people want to eat, what they find appealing, who's buying what and when they're buying. Tenacity and persistence are required as you contact wholesalers, supermarkets, groceries, restaurants, cataloguers, gift-basket stores, herbalists and other potential customers to sell your goods. Selling produce or flowers is like selling any other product. You must show your customers that your product is of high quality and be amenable to their needs.

Start-up Costs:

“If you're already a gardener, your start-up costs will be minimal, but if you're starting from scratch, expect to spend \$10,000 or more,” advises Lynn Bycznski, author and publisher of the Growing for Market newsletter. Here's where your money will go:
Land: How much land you need to earn a full-time living depends on what kind of crops you have. Where crops can be in ground year-round, a quarter of acre can be profitable. In most parts of the country with a winter season it takes two to ten acres.

Supplies: You will need seed, fertilizers, growing pots, planting boxes, hoses and other supplies. Expect to invest from \$500 to \$2,000 at first. [Greenhouse: Use hoops and plastic to cover beds For higher temperatures use a large hoop house and use hoops over the beds inside the house-KH].

A vehicle to service your accounts: You should be able to get a used truck for around \$4,000 or a used van for \$6,000 to \$8,000; new delivery vans cost around \$14,000 to \$16,000.

Office supplies: You can set up an administrative office with computer, multifunction printer and fax, a desk, chair and file cabinet for about \$1,500. Business cards and stationery may cost between \$100 to \$400. While you can make labels and signs yourself by hand or with your computer, spending \$1,000 to \$2,000 on a designer may produce a return many times over in increased sales.

Typical Gross Revenues:

The average gross sales for market gardening is \$8,000 per acre.

\$7,000 to \$12,000 an acre for specialty produce sold to consumers and upscale restaurants.

\$10,000 to \$12,000 an acre for herbs and spices.

\$15,000 to \$30,000 an acre for cut flowers.

Greenhouses: According to greenhouse expert Ted Taylor, a 30-by-96-foot greenhouse holding 10,000 six-inch pots can produce \$2.50 profit per pot, or about \$20,000 in 90 days. [For vegetable growing use PVC pipe covered with plastic over the beds. In colder climates use a 50 ft. x 100 ft. hoop house made of PVC pipe covered in plastic [\$500] and inside use PVC pipe covered with plastic over the beds. This will move your zone 3 zones south- KH].

Farmers' Markets: Grower sales average \$1,000 a day, according to a reader survey by the Growing for Market newsletter. In smaller markets, sales range from \$200 to \$700, but in New York's Green Market, sales can reach \$3,000 a day. Expect to pay between \$25 and \$75 a day for a space at a farmers' market, though some markets are now charging a percentage of gross receipts. [Lubbock farmer's markets charge \$10 per space per day-KH]

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Proving Small Is Profitable Too

Peter Bane

Multinationals will never be able to produce “vegetables with the farmer’s face on them.” Despite USDA’s pathetic attempt to gut the meaning of the word “organic” with the issuance of bogus federal rules, the simple message: “Health means eating a lot of fresh, uncontaminated vegetables and fruits” rings clearer and clearer in the national consciousness. Confidence in the conventional food supply is headed for the basement. Thus, conditions for the rebirth of an old industry, truck farming on the urban fringe [and inter-urban, too. KH], appear to have set in permanently.

Bob and Bonnie Gregson [Rebirth of The Small Family Farm, Box 2542, Vashon Island WA 98070, \$10 ppd], calculate that participation in subscription farming by no more than 5% of the 2-3 million people in greater Seattle, where they farm two acres, would keep 1400 tiny farms like theirs on Vashon Island fully busy and prosperous. And they mean prosperous. Their experience and that of other growers suggest that a two-acre general purpose farm operated by two people can earn the local median income within four years from startup and will reach a practical limit at about \$40-50,000 net per year. If enough readers take their example to heart, in a few years we could be seeing these postage stamp farms occupying the economic high ground (the upper 5-10% of all

farms by income), while producing most of the food that actually feeds people. We are talking about a new revolution in agriculture!

The Gregsons lay out solid, essential information for the would-be farmer, telling their own story-complete with sore shoulders, marketing stumbles and mature psychological insight-concisely and intelligently. Even more to the point, they analyze, from the perspective of experienced professional managers the conditions they believe supported their success. They have done so with a welcome absence of naive hucksterism.

“Many are amazed to discover that we two middle-aged novice farmers are making a living on less than two acres of land. Even more amazing is that the model appears to be replicable by almost anyone, almost anywhere in this country and many others. Technological advances, careful planning and marketing directly to the consumer have reestablished this time-honored format as a basis for the new small family farm.”

Useful appendices list Meadow Farm’s actual crop selection and harvest data, revealing the practical limits of each planting. These two earnestly want their readers to succeed, joining them in a movement that could profoundly reshape the character of the nation.

The main limiting factor facing future small peri-urban [and inter-urban. KH] farmers, but one which life circumstances eased for the authors, is access to capital. Though the financial requirements of a small farm business are modest (\$11,000 by this

account) most younger couples, particularly with children, would face significant obstacles in financing a small farm venture, particularly when the cost of purchasing land and housing is factored in. But Bob Gregson is not chairman of the King County Agriculture Commission for nothing. His innovative proposal to institute a “G I Bill” for small family farmers addresses that need for capital hopefully. At once visionary and highly practical, such a program-combining education with the homestead model of finance-could rapidly accelerate a healthy transformative process already underway.

“The loss of the small family farm has seriously damaged our whole culture over the past 60 years. But now, mixed-crop farms as described in this book and pasture-based small livestock operations described in Joel Salatin’s books, offer economically viable options to start healing that damage.”

The Gregsons have given us a clear testament of a middle-class model that can succeed in the U. S. This simple book is a significant contribution to the literature of ecological restoration in American culture for it describes the steps by which almost any two, having a bit of intelligence and willing to work hard, can pay for the establishment of a system using local resources to serve local needs. Permaculture Activist, No. 38, Black Mountain NC 28711-1209, culturesedge@earthaven.org