

How to Make the Most of It

Part Four

John Messina



Five Years on Five Acres— Tips to Go About It Right

By Arthur Johnson

Many of us have a creative need to be productive in our spare time. For some, this means woodworking, cooking, painting, or writing. For others, the need can be filled by part-time farming. All of these should be considered hobbies and cost money to pursue, but other people may be willing to buy some of the products of our creativity.

I've lived for five years on a few acres such as you probably envisioned when you picked up this book. At different times I've raised beef, sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, vegetables, strawberries, and fruit trees. I've tried various ideas to find the best, and also read and compared the experiences of others in similar situations.

Although living and producing on five acres is not the same as on 500, many techniques and methods can be adapted for small-scale operations.

Keep in mind some basic guidelines when starting to farm on a few acres. The first is, be cautious. Begin by producing on a very small scale, perhaps only enough to satisfy your own needs. Learn what problems you will encounter: diseases, insects, climate, and the requirements of quality and timeliness. These problems are likely to become more severe as production scale increases.

I heard of a man who bought 100 ducklings from a farmer thinking he could sell dressed ducks for a large profit. When he accidentally killed one of the ducks, he hurried back to the farmer to ask how to pluck and clean ducks. Clearly, that man did not realize what he was in for.

An important factor is whether you can produce your product profitably with acceptable quality, and what the local market is for that product. Some simple record-keeping will be

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necessary or you may end up subsidizing the food budgets of your customers.

Pleasing the Clientele

Pleasing your customers so they will return requires you to sell the best of your product and guarantee satisfaction. One man sold a pig to a customer and accidentally broke its shoulder when loading it on the truck to be hauled to the butcher. He had to replace the pork shoulder with one from his own pork to satisfy the customer.

Knowing your market is probably the most important factor in developing a profitable enterprise. Determining where or to whom to sell your produce takes some work, but is very important. Markets may be already available, as a local farmers' market, or you may have to create your own. This requires some selling on your part to get started, such as advertising in a local paper, and some system to keep in touch with past customers—especially if they are satisfied. These customers make the best advertisement for you. Be sure they are completely satisfied if you wish to sell to them again.

There are economies of size. Small-scale farms cannot compete against large farms if they sell to the same markets. It's a good idea to market directly to the consumer, charging a fair price above wholesale and below retail. With food items, there is a considerable spread between farm market value and store shelf price. You and the customer can both do well by a direct transaction.

Selling directly to the consumer requires you to produce consumer-oriented crops, not field crops such as wheat. Strawberries, vegetables, fruits, honey, eggs, and popular meat animals are among the most marketable items. Cater to needs of the local populace, and grow items which are not abundantly available in your local area.

A good source of information on all matters is your local Cooperative Extension Agent. Many of them are becoming more aware of the needs of small-scale farmers. Your state department of agriculture may also be of service.

Production methods may vary considerably depending on the crop and farm size. With your main source of income not derived from the farm, you can experiment with new ideas. Mistakes may not be quite as costly as on large farms.

Regardless of your small-scale farm's size, a considerable investment is still required. Rearing 10 feeder pigs to slaughter calls for more than two tons of feed, plus cost of the pigs, plus cost of water, labor, buildings, and other equipment. Out-of-

pocket costs are at least \$700. An investment for dwarf fruit trees might be \$10 per tree and five years to production. In general, the more profitable the crop, the larger the initial investment required.

Techniques

Decide on appropriate production methods. You can use large-scale production methods or something completely different. An example of the difference is buying a tractor, mower, rake, and baler to produce hay vs using a lawn mower to chop grass to make silage. Both methods allow your animals to be fed during winter. Another example is the use of a large tractor and cultivators vs rotary tiller vs herbicides vs mulch to control weeds in a strawberry plot.

I prefer a balanced farm with little waste. This means several crops, both animal and vegetable. Pig waste can be used to help grow strawberries and vegetables; waste vegetables can be used to help feed pigs. If pig waste is used, a fall application is recommended.

Ground unsuitable to vegetable growing can be used as pasture for sheep, goats, or cows, and fruit trees can be grown in the same area. Ducks, geese, and chickens help keep fertility of the area high. All of these can be marketable crops in your area.

In all of this, you must have tools and equipment. To reduce your investment, watch announcements of farm auctions and sales. Used tools can often be bought for a small fraction of their price when new.

Remember there are laws and regulations governing production and sale of food items, and these vary from location to location. Often the sale of processed food is prohibited unless the processing was done in inspected facilities. Examples are butchering and cutting of meat and poultry, and handling of milk.

Pesticides, herbicides, other sprays, and feed additives must be used within registered restrictions (crops, application methods, withholding periods). Beehive inspections are required. Use of sewage sludge for fertilizer may be restricted while use of composted sludge may not be.

It is wise to know the regulations that apply in your area, especially if you deal directly with the public.

Small-scale farming can be a rewarding hobby. Often it requires most of your free time and does not allow you to leave home for extended periods of time. But for those who like it, every day is a vacation.