

Quit Your Job ... And Go Farm In The City

► Gail Vandersteen harvests romaine lettuce at a backyard plot. Vandersteen and her partner, Wally Satzewich, sell produce locally that was raised on twenty five back-yard plots. They are co-creators, with Roxanne Christensen, of SPIN Farming.

Photo - Wally Satzewich



Photo - Wally Satzewich



► Vandersteen harvests early carrots at a relative's back yard. Considered a high-value crop, about 500 bunches of carrots were brought to the market this particular Saturday and they were all sold. These carrot beds will be replanted to other crops in this same season.

“While the land base and expenses for a sub-acre farm are a fraction of the costs for a conventional, multi-acre farm, the bottom lines are similar. And counter intuitive though it seems, a sub-acre farmer can expect to make the same living as a large-scale farmer, but with less stress and overhead, and with more certainty of success from year to year.”

– Wally Satzewich



Wally Satzewich in a rented back yard. A five minute drive from his home, Satzewich stops here almost every day. These June crops of radish, lettuce, and chard will be harvested soon.

SPIN FARMING means small plot intensive farming.

It is for the young, middle aged and retired.

You don't need farming experience or a lot of money and the creators of SPIN farming processes show you how.



Mid-summer in Satzewich's backyard are gladiolus and carrots. Rhubarb is harvested all summer and is planted in peripheral areas.

Leaving your job to farm in the city may sound outlandish, until you look a little deeper at your present job and the state of industrial food.

Fifty percent of Americans are not happy with their jobs according to the Conference Board, a 90 year-old research organization that provides statistics to the world's largest corporations. The Conference Board reports that two out of every three workers do not identify with or feel motivated to drive their employer's business goals and objectives. Not surprisingly, only one third of Americans are satisfied with their pay.

This dismal relationship between people and their jobs coincides with another dismal relationship between people, food and the land food grows on.

Conventional farming has taken on the stigma of a rural enterprise whose capital investment and returns are scaring off even the farmer's own children. So when cash flows are inverted, its time to dispose of

the best farmland for urbanization.

This dismal relationship to work and food does not have to be so. Wally Satzewich and Gail Vandersteen from Saskatoon in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan teamed up with Roxanne Christensen from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to formalize a new career path that has local food at its center.

Satzewich and Vandersteen, with years of experience in urban agriculture, and Christensen with publishing experience and creator of Somerton Tanks Farm, joined forces to create SPIN Farming™ in 2006.

SPIN stands for small plot intensive. The outcome of their collaboration resulted in the creation of 10 how-to guides and case studies for urban sub-acre food production. Sub-acre means less than one acre. Their case studies profile a number of SPIN Farm scenarios, including:

- A 5,000-square-foot part-time hobby farm model that generates \$10,000 to 20,000 in gross annual sales.
- A 20,000-square-foot intermediate full-time farm model that generates \$54,000 annually.
- A 1-acre full-time model that grosses \$50,000 to \$65,000 annually.

Priced at \$11.99 per guide, you can get all 10 guides for less than \$120. Compared to the cost of conventional education or the education of trial and error, they represent a real savings.

Behind the guides are many years of small farm experience and the unusual economic discovery of Satzewich and Vandersteen.

Satzewich and Vandersteen started farming on a one-acre plot 20 years ago. Following the conventional wisdom of growth, they ultimately purchased 20 acres of irrigated land outside of town. Though the site was beautiful, they had tremendous challenges from bugs, deer and wind along with all the other challenges of employees and transportation.

Satzewich and Vandersteen kept their home in the city where they maintained a few small garden plots in back yards to grow radishes, carrots and salad mix, which were their most profitable crops. They discovered that on small city plots they could grow three crops a year, pick and process on the same site ►

► Vandersteen harvesting in a rented backyard. This late-spring photo shows how advanced the crops are early in the season. Micro climates in urban areas are generally warmer than in outlying rural areas. This is a real market advantage as Vandersteen and Satzewich have crops weeks before growers from the country have produce.

Photo - Wally Satzewich



Photo - Roxanne Christensen



◄ An open house at Somerton Tanks Farm. The farm is located on property owned by the Philadelphia Water Department and adjacent to checkered water tanks. With less than one acre of land to farm on, this parcel grossed over \$67,000 in 2006.

and put produce into a cooler so it would be fresh for the market. Even the warmer micro-climate of the city was an advantage.

After six years farming their rural site, Satzewich and Vandersteen realized there was more money to be made growing multiple crops intensively in the city. Going against conventional wisdom, they sold their 20-acre farm and continued their urban operations.

“People don’t believe you can grow three crops a year in Saskatoon,” Vandersteen said. “They think it’s too much work, but the truth is, this is much less work than mechanized, large-scale farming. We used to have a tractor to hill potatoes and cultivate, but we find it’s more efficient to do things by hand. Other than a rototiller, all we need is a push-type seeder and a few hand tools.”

Satzewich explains that city growing provides a more controlled environment, with fewer pests, better wind protection and a longer growing season.

“We are producing 10-15 different crops and sell thousands

of bunches of radishes and green onions and thousands of bags of salad greens and carrots each season. Our volumes are low compared to conventional farming, but we sell high-quality organic products at high-end prices,” Satzewich said.

Satzewich and Vandersteen now farm 25 backyard plots that sum a half acre.

When asked about how he manages and gets around to 25 back yard mini-farms, Satzewich exposed many new concepts about neighborhood relationships and working with the human family.

“If I’m farming one backyard, chances are good that I’m farming one across the alley, one next door and several others in the immediate area. The backyards we farm are located in clusters, making it efficient to manage,” Satzewich said. “Often times when I set the water in one backyard and leave to go to the next, a resident of the first backyard might come out and finish the watering while I’m working in other backyards.”

Satzewich and Vandersteen don’t advertise for backyard ►

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**– Roxanne Christensen
Co-creator of SPIN**

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► Families and children visiting Somerton Tank Farm make an easier connect with their food when the it is grown, harvested and washed close to home.

Photo - Roxanne Christensen



plots to farm as “word of mouth” gives them all the land they need.

“The visual impact of a well managed and neat mini-farm in one’s backyard is compelling. People like to feel they are doing something of value including seeing the home gardening tradition continued. They want to be a part of it,” Satzewich said.

Satzewich explains compensation for use of a backyard varies from plot to plot. Some people receive \$150 credit for produce at Satzewich’s farm stand at the farmers market. Some people ask for nothing in exchange for something constructive going on and not having to put time and money into maintaining their backyard. Some people are happy for just enough cash to pay the water bill.

Roxanne Christensen, meanwhile, was getting other valuable experience in sub-acre urban farming. As president of the Institute for Innovations in Local Farming, Christensen garnered support from numerous public agencies that led to the development of Somerton Tanks Farm. Somerton Tanks Farm is operated on land

owned by Philadelphia Water Department.

Over the last four years, Christensen nurtured the sub-acre Somerton Tanks Farm and farmers Nicole and Steve Shelly. This past year, Somerton Tanks Farm grossed \$67,000 in 10 months.

Christensen explains that the SPIN farming model opens the doors to farming for a large portion of the public.

“The initial high capital costs of land and equipment no longer apply to people who want to produce quality food,” Christensen said. “The separation of country and city is a bankrupt concept.

“As development erodes the rural way of life, agriculture is creeping closer and closer to metropolitan areas. SPIN Farming leverages this trend in a positive way – by capitalizing on limited resources and space. Creating Somerton Tanks Farm, using the SPIN method, required minimal up front investment and it keeps operating overhead low,” Christensen said.

For the Somerton Tank Farm the biggest investments were a walk-in cooler, delivery truck, roto tiller and irrigation ad post harvesting station. These costs can be kept to a minimum if ►

you look for good used equipment.

The SPIN Farming guides became available at the SPIN Web site in March of 2006. Since that time almost 340 guides have found their way to all parts of the country.

"What is encouraging about sales of the SPIN guides is the broad cross-section of people buying them. They are young, middle-aged and retired people as well as people wanting a new career," Christensen said.

SPIN Farming is now developing a new series of guides on specialty operations such as garlic and salad mixes.

Finding land for SPIN Farming comes simply from the urban farmer and often very willing homeowners to agree on a workable arrangement for use of the yard. Terms are varied and can include trades of produce for use of the land.

For the more serious individual, SPIN Farming is having its first annual conference sponsored by the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in East Troy Wisconsin on March 22 through the 24th, 2007. Attendees will be able to meet the creators of SPIN Farming and get ready for a new future. ■

WEB RESOURCES:

SPIN Farming: www.spinfarming.com

Wally's Urban Market Garden: ww.marketgardening.com

Somerton Tanks Farm: www.somertontanksfarm.org

Michael Fields Ag Institute: www.michaelfieldsaginst.org

SPIN Farming Highlights

- Makes it possible to make a living from a sub-acre land base in the city, country or small town.
- You don't need to own land. You can affordably rent plots.
- If you are in a city you can rent backyards.
- Modest financial start-up costs. Little or no debt.
- Multiple farm plots are divided into different areas of production intensity.
- Reliance on hand labor to accomplish most farming tasks.
- Situated close to markets saving time and money.
- Utilizes existing water sources to meet irrigation needs.
- Urban micro-climates may have productivity and marketing advantages in northern regions.
- Precise revenue targeting formulas and organic-based growing techniques make possible \$50,000 in gross sales from 1/2 acre.
- Business models to accommodate any life style or life cycle.
- Minimal overhead produces a strong bottom line.



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Small Farmer's Journal



Professionals Pursue Urban Agriculture

As the popularity of farmers markets and consumer supported agriculture grows, so does the concept of urban agriculture.

Few will take the position that mainstream agriculture is going to move into the city anytime soon. In fact, mainstream agriculture, with its chemical footprint, is trying to distance itself from the city to avoid the kinds of collisions that come from neighborhoods getting too close to toxic sprays.

The popularity of organic food, however, is changing not only how people shop for food, but removes the barriers of having farming operations close to or inside of the city—the toxins are no longer there.

The science and development of organic practices has opened the door for agriculture to integrate itself into urban areas, and with that comes new career paths for professionals who have a sustainability ethics and take pride in their work.

Now that you've earned your college degree, what are you going to do with it? Maybe you should establish a relationship with the people who own the empty lots in your area and start up a market garden.

Meet Marty Camberlango and Casey O'Leary of Boise, Idaho who did just that. Camberlango has a degree in Communications and O'Leary has a degree in Horticulture. Back in 2005, after deciding that corporate America was not their forte, they started working together farming vacant lots and some backyards.

This year Camberlango will be selling his produce at the Boise Farmers Market from his City Gardens farm.

O'Leary will sell her produce from her Earthly Delights Farm under a CSA model where each week her shareholder customers receive a fresh box of produce.

Using hand tools and their own labor to do the farming work, they travel between their plots on bicycles, doing everything to keep their overhead low and the bottom line up.

"Today we have to show and tell the story of the vegetable, what it is and its use in order to keep the relationship with customers," Camberlango said.

While O'Leary and Camberlango have separate farming enterprises, they work together for efficiency—sharing equipment, a seeding shed and even purchasing seeds together to get bulk discounts.

"We get a lot of support from neighbors who are adjacent to the vacant lots we farm. They like that things are cleaned up, no weeds and the work we do," Camberlango said.

O'Leary and Camberlango represent a growing awareness of not only responsibly raised food, but the efficiencies that are there to tap into by just thinking creatively.



(Top) Casey O'Leary (left) and Marty Camberlango share some city plots together. Neighbors and owners enjoy having the presence of an organically maintained food garden in their midst.

(Below) Casey O'Leary (right) shares a seeding shed with Marty Camberlango. Even though O'Leary and Camberlango have separate operations, their sharing of resources helps them both.

(photos - Touch the Soil)

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