

Book review

Successful Small-Scale Farming

An Organic Approach

by Karl Schwenke Storey Publishing, Pownal, Vermont 1991 130 pages, paperback

Reviewed by Jack Kittredge

This is an updated version of the popular 1979 guide of the same name. The author has owned a small farm in Newbury, Vermont for over 15 years, and knows of what he speaks. This is unquestionably the best "homesteader" guide I've seen yet - short on cutesy narrative and long on practical information.

Schwenke starts where farmers must, with the soil: texture, organic matter, water, fertility; and then goes on to discuss plants - their biology, reproduction and culture. He is clear about the benefits of organic methods, for both economic and ethical reasons, but does not belabour the point.

The books strongest sections deal with the practical issues of farming- choosing crops, machinery, and systems which will work. The sections on field preparation and equipment are excellent primers for anyone who has not managed a farm before. His discussions of crop choice are adapted for a book of this scope, but he gives enough examples that will allow application of the methods to any possibilities.

He analyses hay, corn, wheat and oats, potatoes, beans and berries from the point of view of marketing and income, rotation, variety selection, equipment needs and field practices, among others. By the time the reader has been through the examples, holding a new respect for the management challenges facing small farmers is unavoidable.

Although crops and equipment are some of the more obvious parts of farm management, Schwenke does not forget the infrastructure issues: roads, water, the woodlot, fences and the shop. His sections on each of these are filled with sound advice and well thought-out ideas for practical gates, simple surveying tools, and cheap substitutes for fancy farm equipment.

The final section contains two appendices worthy of special mention. The first gives handy conversion tables and measuring standards-hectares to acres; links, rods and chains to inches, acres, sections and townships; pecks to bushels; inches to spans and cubits; board feet to cords; Btu's from various species of wood, etc. This kind of reference material is not useful all the time, but when needed, it can save hours!

The second appendix provides extensive tables: the contents and nutritional needs of various farm products; seeding rates for various crops; storage requirements for many fruits and vegetables; fertilizing potential of farm by-products; machinery storage space needs; densities and volumes of grains/seeds; water flow measurements; standing timber to board foot estimates; and monthly labour required for various home-production enterprises.

Schwenke's conclusion is an apt summary of his philosophy: "Farming is a state of mind, not an adopted avocation. If your He's objective is to make enough money from farming to become part of the consumer culture - to amass new things like new cars, automatic dish washers, and colour TV's-then small scale farming is not for you. Given these priorities, you are better off staying with a nine-to five city job, or floating an enormous farm loan so that you can compete in the same arena with agribusiness. Simplicity of lifestyle, a dedication to careful planning, and a steadfast commitment to permanence are the essential elements of a successful small scale farming venture."

Successful Small Scale Farming is thoroughly illustrated with helpful and pleasing hand drawings of the topics being discussed by Elaine Sears and Schwenke himself. In a book like this an appropriate illustration is worth well over a thousand words, and this one is full of them. Reprinted from the Natural Farmer, Spring 1991. Jack Kittredge is co-editor of the Natural Farmer, RFD #2, Barre, MA 01005

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