



Frequently Asked Questions

Are you S-small P-plot IN-quisitive? Here are answers to questions we have been asked the most since we began pioneering sub-acre farming practices in 2001. Some are posed by aspiring farmers short on cash or land or both. Some come from concerned citizens looking to make their communities more farm-friendly. Others are asked by reporters who know a good story when they see one. Still others are asked by policymakers who are realizing that sustainability is more than just an egghead phrase. If what's on your mind is not answered here, you can find us at www.spinfarming.com, and we'll either satisfy your interest or make you even more curious.

Can the average person do SPIN-Farming?

As near as we can tell, success at *SPIN-Farming* or any other kind of farming, is not determined by education level or prior work experience. What you do need is a deep and passionate interest in farming, which involves working outside long hours in all kinds of weather (some have described it as a calling to farm), a genuine talent for growing, a good business sense, and a willingness to invest years in learning, training and building a business. If you have all that, *SPIN-Farming* makes it easier and less risky to get started and increases your chances of success.

Can *SPIN-Farming* turn a brown thumb into a green thumb?

No. If you haven't met a plant you can't kill, farming is not your line of work.

What are *SPIN-Farming's* margins?

Farming is not like a grocery store, which buys produce and resells it at a markup. With entrepreneurial farming, it's more helpful to think of yearly overhead, or expenses. The *SPIN-Farming* system provides ways to reduce expenses because of its sub-acre scale. Examples include using your personal vehicle as a farm vehicle; creating an inexpensive irrigation system from standard grade garden hoses; minimal mechanization; organic-based, local sources of supply for fertilizer; an inexpensive post-harvesting setup; and minimizing or even eliminating the need for outside labor, which is the single biggest expense of any farm operation.

How many hours per week does a *SPIN* farmer work?

SPIN-Farming is not based on season extension, so most operations span about 8 months. In the *SPIN* hobby farm model, during peak season, which is mid-summer for most, a farmer will put in 40 - 45 hours each week, spread out over 7 days. During non-peak months, the number of hours drop to about 30 hours each week, spread out over 7 days.

In a *SPIN* full-time half-acre farm model, during peak season, a farmer couple will put in 40 - 45 hours each week, spread out over 7 days. They may have occasional outside help. During non-peak months, the number of hours will be about 30 hours each week, spread out over 7 days.

In a *SPIN* full-time 1 acre farm model, during peak season a farmer couple will be putting in about 50-60 hours each week, spread out over 7 days. They may have occasional outside help. During non-peak months, the number of hours will be about 35 hours each week, spread out over 7 days.

How much land should I initially put into production?

SPIN-Farming is based on allocating your land base to different areas of production intensity. The system is based on the 1-2-3 layout, where the 1 area of your farm is the least intensive and is devoted to lower value single crops per season, like cabbage, onion, potatoes or squash. The 2 area of your farm is devoted to bi-relay crops, in which 2 higher-value crops per bed per season are grown sequentially. And the 3 area of your farm is where you are doing your intensive relays in which 3 or more high-value crops per bed per season are grown sequentially. Each of these areas contribute a different amount to your total income, with the 3 high-value area obviously contributing the most.

SPIN-Farming is an exercise in figuring out how much money you want to make, determining the amount of your operation that needs to be put in the most intensive form of production to generate that income, and the labor needed to support that. This is not figured out in one season. It takes years of trial and error to find the optimum balance.

Why does *SPIN-Farming* make business sense?

There are two reasons why *SPIN* makes good business sense:

--*SPIN* removes the 2 big barriers to entry for new farmers - land and capital
-- *SPIN*'s sub-acre scale provides a way to locate vegetable farming operations close to markets, and it also reduces a farmer's expenses. By locating close to markets, farmers can direct market, which eliminates the middleman and allows a farmer to keep 100% of his/her sales. Examples of lower expenses in the *SPIN-Farming* system include: using a personal vehicle as a farm vehicle - a mini or cargo van or mini-truck is adequate in size for sub-acre scale farming; creating an inexpensive irrigation system from standard grade garden hoses; using minimal mechanization - no expensive equipment is necessary; using organic-based, local sources of supply for fertilizer which eliminates the use of expensive chemicals; using an inexpensive post-harvesting setup; and minimizing or even eliminating the need for outside labor, which is the single biggest expense of any farm operation. The aim with *SPIN-Farming* is to keep expenses at 10% to 20% of total sales. So if you target \$50,000 in sales then you should target \$5,000 to \$10,000 in expenses. The high end would account for some hired labor. Labor is the single biggest expense in any farm operation, so *SPIN* farmers aim to minimize or even eliminate the need for outside labor. It very much carries on the tradition of conventional farming of tapping into the low-cost, no-cost network of family and friends and barter labor for produce when possible.

What makes *SPIN* different for other farming approaches?

SPIN-Farming is as close to a franchise-ready farming system as you can get while still accommodating the creative and place-based nature of farming. *SPIN*'s growing techniques are not, in themselves, breakthrough. What is novel is the way a *SPIN* farm business is run. *SPIN* provides everything you'd expect from a good franchise: a business plan, marketing advice, and a detailed day-to-day workflow. In standardizing the system and creating a reproducible process it really isn't any different from McDonalds. By offering a non-technical, easy-to-understand and inexpensive-to-implement farming system, it allows many more people to farm, wherever they live, as long as there are nearby markets to support them

Here is what distinguishes the *SPIN-Farming* system:

--it is geared toward making significant income from farming on a sub-acre (less than an acre) land base; this means you don't have to own much - if any - land
--it is low capital intensive - you do not need to invest in a lot of expensive equipment, which increases your bottom line
--it is entirely market-driven, meaning it shows you how to plant strategically based on what sells at market and provides precise revenue targeting formulas so that you run your farming operation like any other type of small business; this way you have a steady and predictable income
--it outlines a five day work flow, so that you do not burn yourself out keeping a typical "farmer" schedule of 90 hour work weeks

Doesn't *SPIN's* intensive growing techniques deplete the soil?

Intensive relay cropping will give your soil a work out, but because of the sub-acre scale of *SPIN-Farming*, it is much easier to keep your soil healthy, and at a reasonable cost. You can use your rototiller to plow in compost, and individual beds can be amended on a case-by-case basis. Locally-sourced, all organic amendments can be used that would not be feasible on larger scale farms. Many of these amendments are available at local animal feed stores in 50 pound bags, and they are not laborious to apply.

Many of the crops in *SPIN's* intensive relays are not heavy feeders, and even though you are growing 3 or more crops per bed per growing season in the intensive relay area, the demands on the soil are not as great as some single long season crops such as corn. When growing crops in the relay area you often do so in series. For instance you might have a section where you have 10 beds of carrots. Carrots, in fact, do not like an overly fertile soil, so you need not go on a "fertilizing binge" prior to planting. Also, some relay crops are nitrogen fixers, such as beans and peas. So although the relay areas see a lot of production, burning out your soil can be avoided with modest soil amendments and strategic planting. Just follow the guideline that "inputs need to equal outputs" and amend on an ongoing basis by lightly fertilizing after each crop, as well as side dressing long season crops, especially garlic. Again, keep in mind that some crops, such as carrots, lettuce, radish and fresh herbs, are light feeders while others, such as spinach, garlic, onions and beets are heavier feeders, and adjust your amending appropriately.

What impact will the economic downturn have on *SPIN* farmers?

The economic downturn will have impact in three areas of relevance to *SPIN* farmers:

Sustainability - Now that we have seen the consequences of a financial system that is unsustainable, sustainability has more currency and legitimacy. It is no longer just an abstract, moral imperative, and it is spurring permanent changes in how our country operates. This can only help *SPIN* and other farm systems that are based on sound economic and environmental practices.

Entrepreneurship – Establishing independent businesses will be more attractive since incentives for joining the corporate system have been undermined or removed. Striking out on your own carries less risk than it used to, and some of this unleashed new entrepreneurship can be channeled into farming.

Staying put – For many, the costs and disruption of mobility have become too much to bear. So value will be shifted closer to home, resulting in re-investment in local communities. Economics will become more place-based, and this will help the re-establishment of more locally-based food systems. Overall, we'd say the future is in the *SPIN* farmer's favor.

What is urban agriculture?

Because *SPIN's* efforts have been focused on providing a business case for urban agriculture, we define it as integrating agriculture into the built environment in an economically viable manner

Where is my city on the urban ag adoption curve?

At this point, there is no curve. Just about every city is starting from square one when it comes to developing agricultural self-sufficiency. So the good news is no one is late to the party or too far ahead of the curve, but the bad news is there is no set of best practices or implementation plan that can be plugged in and followed. Every city is making it up as they go along. None of them want to re-invent the wheel and seek out models that they can replicate, which is what leads them to *SPIN-Farming*.

We tell cities that we can guarantee they already have 3 of the critical success factors for urban agriculture, and the other 2 are theirs for the asking.

What cities have is land, though they often find this hard to believe. But once they adopt *SPIN*'s sub-acre mindset, they start to see lots of possibilities. Cities also have a variety of easily accessible markets and financing sources for the micro level financing that is all sub-acre farming operations need.

Entrepreneurial farmers are theirs for the asking, as more and more first generation farmers are eager to recast farming as a small business inside cities. Some of these aspiring farmers are native born city dwellers that can be cultivated with the proper training, while others can be attracted from outside cities' borders. The other thing that is theirs for the asking is appropriately scaled farming systems, and *SPIN* provides one model.

I don't want to farm but I'd like to see my yard put to good use by a *SPIN* farmer. How can I do that?

You can list your offer of backyard or front lawn cropland through your local newspaper, or any like-minded local organization. Craigslist is also becoming a popular listing source, and the going rate for backyard cropland listed there runs about \$100 per 1,000 square feet for the season, including the use of water. You can also email us on our website – www.spinfarming.com – and we will post your offer in the *SPIN* farmers email support group.

Can *SPIN*-Farming work in (name any place in the world)?

SPIN is not place-based. It is currently being practiced throughout the U.S., Canada, Australia, the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands and South Africa. Each *SPIN* farmer adapts the system to his or her climate, markets, talents and available resources. There are two things all *SPIN* farmers do have in common – markets to support them, and an entrepreneurial spirit. They are creating their farm businesses without major policy changes or government support. They are highly s-small p-lot in-dependent.

Can *SPIN* work with other farming systems?

SPIN is a production system, not a belief system. It is not predicated on any one set of life principals or philosophy, or any one method of soil prep or maintenance. It can be combined with biointensive, biodynamic, permaculture, vermaculture, acquaculture, double dig, no till. We recommend the use of a rototiller because it increases efficiency which results in high income. But if a rototiller does not fit in with the way you think the world should work and you are willing to accept the consequences to your bottom line, you can choose not to use it.

What is the organization behind *SPIN*-Farming?

SPIN Farming LLC is a multinational, diversified cottage industry. It publishes the *SPIN-Farming*® and *SPIN-Gardening*™ online learning series and conducts workshops in partnership with leading farming, gardening and environmental organizations. Like the farmers it supports, our company seeks to show how to live large, yet be small. It is helping to lead the way towards a post-material value system that brings out the best in people and which utilizes the world's most valuable assets - an environmental ethos, technical agility and urbanized landscapes.

So is *SPIN* a movement?

Ask those who are doing it.

Join in!

SPIN is helping people around the world pioneer a new way to farm. It is sub-acre in scale and entrepreneurial in spirit. It is unencumbered by dogma and grounded in local communities. Those who practice it are showing how to make more from less. Those who support it are accelerating the shift back to common sense, free enterprise farming. SPIN is both a call-to-farm and a call to good eating. Join in at www.spinfarming.com

***SPIN* Makes Agriculture Accessible to Anyone, Anywhere!**