

Start Growing! Part 1: How to Buy a Farm Debt Free

Posted November 1, 2013 by *Fraser Bliss* & filed under *Commercial Farm Projects, Financial Management*.



Let's say you have a bit of savings and you're keen to buy land to farm. Even though permaculture has taught you how to see the hidden value in land and you have the skills to rehabilitate the most degraded landscapes, land is by no means cheap.

The problem is not that you can't borrow money to purchase that hidden gem you've found. The problem is that the real costs only begin once you start; equipment, materials, transportation, energy, development, effort to build up a customer base. You'd have the burden of repaying the loan while you're still at your most vulnerable — the startup phase. That means never giving the farm a fair chance to get up and running, a chance to be financially sustainable.

Is there another way? You bet.

My background is in business, finance and information technology. A decade ago, I would have never guessed that I'd one day be Bill Mollison's farm manager and run several permaculture businesses. My first contact with permaculture was back when I was learning as much as I could about agriculture and climate so that I could profit by speculating in commodity futures. Although those days are past, I pass this on to would-be farmers (it also applies to any local food business):

Focus on income producing investments

Isn't farmland an investment? Of course it is, but it doesn't magically produce a yield by itself. Even the most efficient permaculture design still requires input from you, especially in the early years.

The trick is to choose assets with the highest return on investment. That's what you get for how much you put in, and how quickly. (Of course we don't consider anything outside of the ethics of earth care, people care and return of surplus.) Then when those assets have paid for themselves and provide cash-flow, you can reinvest the surplus into other assets like land.

Own your farm without the burden of debt

Lets look at three would-be farmers with \$10,000 in savings who want to start a farm.

Meet Robert. He gets a loan of \$90,000 to buy a piece of land and a small herd of cattle. He should have done more research because unexpected costs such as fencing and equipment maintenance have caught him off-guard. He soon finds himself (or his wife) working part-time in town just to make their \$700 monthly loan payment(1). Under this pressure, mistakes are costly. Not able to commit to farming full time, there's a good chance Robert will give up after a few years as he can't keep up with expenses and debt.

Then there's Chris. He knows a farmer approaching retirement willing to lease him a corner of his land at the edge of town. He uses \$7000 of his savings to buy a small herd of heavy calves and invests the rest into the lease, portable electric fencing and other basic necessities. At the end of the season he processes the whole herd, and then makes a deal with the farmer to lease even more land. With a season of experience behind him, he is even more keen to start the next. He discovers he can time-stack poultry in the same space as cattle, and in a few years has earned and saved enough to buy a small piece of farmland debt-free.

Jessica is impressed with Chris' success but thinks she can do even better. Instead of purchasing livestock, she puts all of her savings into leasing land and equipment so that she can start a farm share. Other people pay for livestock. She tends, manages and processes them for a fee. In a few years, she has enough savings to buy land debt-free. Instead of building a house right away on her new farm, she converts a shed into a temporary home opting rather to put in a few dams and swales and to plant up a low maintenance food forest that will pay in dividends later.

Money is merely a tool

It doesn't matter which model of sustainable farming you choose to pursue. Either it sustains itself or you'll have to sustain it. Profit is no different from other types of surplus. It is a healthy and essential part of diverse, abundant systems. It is necessary to keep moving forward. I'm not talking about profit for profit's sake. Don't make it your goal. I'm talking about the efficient use of a very powerful resource.

Money is merely a tool. When we use it skillfully, we decide whether we are the master or the slave.

So follow your heart and pursue your dreams. Even with inflated real estate prices, you can buy your farm debt-free.

Have your own story? Share it!

(1) Approximated: \$90,000 loan at 5% interest over 15 years.

Update: Read Part II here!

Start Growing! Part 2: You Don't Need Money to Buy a Farm

Posted November 15, 2013 by *Fraser Bliss* & filed under *Ethical Investment, Village Development*.



In [Part 1](#) of the Start Growing! series, we explored how you might buy a farm debt-free with as little as \$10,000 in savings. But what if you're young and don't have any savings at all? How can you become an independent, self-employed and profitable farmer when land is so expensive?

It's easier than you might think. Let's take a look.

Where to start

I will assume you have taken a Permaculture Design Certificate (PDC) course or have enough farm experience to know that you want to be a farmer. Perhaps you've done some WWOOFing. Great. If you're going to be a successful farmer, you'll need to be hungry to eat up all the material you can find on modern sustainable agriculture. I'm talking about articles like this and reading a book a week, at least.

“I can’t” does not exist in your vocabulary.

You're also going to need a can-do attitude, because you *will* face challenges. You *will* make mistakes. There will be times when it seems all hope is lost. You must keep going and know that you can't have success without failure. So fail early, fail fast and fail often. Learn from

it. "Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again", as the song goes. This will be easier if you're still young and flexible.

You're going to need a bucket load of self-discipline too. It is nice to fantasize about being your own boss, but that means you're going to have to kick your own ass. It'll be easier if there's no plan B, if you have something to lose. Your chances of success are much higher when your own investment is on the line.

Trim the fat

But you won't need any money in the bank. There isn't a person reading this article that doesn't have something they can't sacrifice to pursue their dreams. This should be pretty easy in today's age of consumerism. Sell or downgrade your car, sell your smartphone, your iPod, auction off designer clothes on ebay (but keep your laptop, you'll need it later). Do odd jobs to scrape a few extra bucks together. Cut all the fat, all the excess in your current lifestyle.

Trust me, you'll feel much better for it. In 2007 I sold everything, from my car to my phone, and went ultra-low budget traveling all round the world for 5 years. It's not about money, it's how badly do you want it? All that stuff is just slowing you down anyways. If you dream big, you can't afford to keep it. Get rid of it.

Start small, start now!

Ok. You're living lean, your head is bursting with ideas from all the farm and permaculture books you've been reading, you've got a few hundred to a few thousand tucked away under your mattress. You're chomping at the bit.

Now you need some real honest-to-god hands-on experience. Parents got a backyard? Permablitz it. Does the old lady next door have a garden that looks like a jungle? Make her a deal she can't refuse. Are there any flat rooftops in your area? Be creative. You have a lot going for you. But you need to start somewhere. Anywhere. Don't dilly-dally. Do it now!

Mistakes are great!

Everybody has a learning curve to go through. When you start small, you are free to make mistakes without the whole world watching you. Small mistakes are cheap mistakes, valuable mistakes. Did you just lose \$300 worth of young fruit trees to predators or drought? No worries, you probably just learned more than on a \$1000 course in horticulture. Good. Be happy. After all, it wasn't a \$30,000 mistake and you don't have mortgage payments to worry about.

When you start small, you grow organically and learn as you go. If you keep putting one foot in front of the other, you will get to where you want to go. It's much better than complaining at the start that the journey is too long, or zooming to the final destination by artificial means with zero experience and huge debts.

Think for yourself

Oh, and be prepared to ignore all the people who tell you can't along the way. Be a contrarian. In the finance world, it's the contrarian that's selling when the whole world is buying and buying when everybody's selling like mad. Guess who ends up with all the money? The guy who went against the crowd. It's not easy, but with practice, you'll get used to it. I personally start getting nervous when too many people start agreeing with me, but that's another story.

Farming 2.0

By now, you're well on your way. You're lean, agile, gaining valuable experience and knowledge every day. You're probably already gardening in most backyards on your block. Maybe you're running chicken tractors, keeping bees, or you've come to an arrangement with a neighbour to tend and pick fruit off their neglected trees? You're probably having a great time and bringing the community closer together too!

So what if you don't own a hundred acres. In my books, you are a farmer, a steward of the land. Keep at it. Maybe one day you'll outgrow your little urban farm and move into the countryside. If not, who cares, if you're having fun! If you do move, great! You'll be taking your experience and customers with you. I'd rather start up on 1 acre with a 100 customers than on a 100 acres with 1 customer.

Let your customers buy your farm. Unlike banks, you can pay them with food.

Next week we'll get into the nuts and bolts to Start Growing! your farming business, big or small.

Read Part 3 of this series [here!](#)

Start Growing! Part 3: Don't Waste Another Minute Until You Know What Your Time is Worth!

Posted November 30, 2013 by [Fraser Bliss](#) & filed under [Commercial Farm Projects](#), [Financial Management](#).

[Find previous episodes of this Start Growing! series.](#)

If you're a farmer, you live with risks that range from weather to injury to financial ruin. But why should you bust your hump from dusk till dawn with stress and risk for less than you'd get pumping gas or working construction?

The answer to that question is found in *time*. Let me explain.

When you think of it, time is all we really have. We're born. We're here for a while. One day our time is up. As life is precious, so is time. We all have aspirations, family, projects and dreams. But it's challenging to find the time for it all.

This is as true for me as it is for you. My background is in business and IT, but I know farm life too. I grew up on a hobby farm in Canada and in 2012 I was Bill Mollison's farm manager in Tasmania. For the past 1.5 years I have put virtually all my time and energy into developing [Farmwell](#). It's web software for farmers who want a simple way to get more customers with less work. There's a waiting list of farmers keen to start using it. These farmers have made it clear that they respect the value of their time and want to invest it wisely.

How much is your time worth?



Before we dive into all the ins and outs of running a successful farming business over the next weeks and months in this Start Growing! series, you have to ask yourself: “What’s my time worth?” Put a number on it. This number essentially reflects your own perception of self-worth. You might want to think twice if it’s not at least 50-100% more than what you’d get working for someone else.

Good. You now know what your time is worth. The rest is easy.

(If you haven’t decided on a figure yet, close your eyes for 30 seconds, factor in any intangibles and pick a number that feels right. Then keep reading.)

Only do work that pays

One of the secrets to a successful farming business is only doing work that pays. This means not wasting your precious time on ventures that don’t pay your minimum salary — on ventures that are not sustainable. More often than not a farm’s cash-cow isn’t producing surpluses for the farmer, it’s spent propping up other parts of the business that aren’t pulling their own weight. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try new things or be charitable. Just be quick to pull the plug on a project when it’s clear that it can’t stand on its own two legs.

Knowing and respecting the value of time ensures we put our efforts to best use.

Work or relax, but not at the same time

Another way to look at this is to make a clear distinction between work and rest. Either you are busy working and getting stuff done, or relaxing. If you try to do both at the same time, you will do neither. When you’re working, focus on the task at hand. When you’re with your family, be present and keep work out of it. We kid ourselves with our ability to multi-task. You know those people on their mobile phones who bump into you on the street, or that rude person texting when you’re trying to have a conversation with them. Do one thing fully, then move to the next.

Avoid distractions

When we value our time, we notice that some activities are neither productive nor relaxing. These are the distractions, the sidetracks, the time bombs. If a task is not either relaxing or getting stuff done, then axe it. Some of the biggest culprits are television, surfing the internet, and busywork. If you’re responsible for paying your own wage, these can be a killer. “Research” is too often an excuse of procrastination.

Workaholics are not heroes

If you’re like me, you are productive in short bursts. Maybe you’re a morning person or maybe you get most done in the last 2 hours before sunset? Whoever you are, if you understand that 80% of work gets done in 20% of your time, you will find that you get lots done and have time to spare.

Workaholics are not heroes. The real hero is the person who finds a way to get the important stuff done at a decent hour and has the evening free to take it easy. But to do this, you must find and use your most productive hours of the day for the most important work and leave the easy tasks for slow periods.

I’ve learned this the hard way, but today it’s still early and I’ve already hammered out the 793 words you’ve read so far. My internet is off because I can’t risk my peak productive hours. Nope, I’ll finish this so I can get it to you before the weekend and then continue

improving Farmwell. I should be able to get everything done and still hit the Farmers' Market.

If you're still reading, you certainly understand this. You've taken the time to start making good use of your most precious resource. Fantastic! The time has come for farmers to grab the bull by the horns and show the world what a noble and rewarding profession farming can be.

Over the coming weeks and months, imagine how your life will be different when you can afford to pay yourself the white collar salary you deserve and you have time working for you, not against you. As you do this, know that I'll be working away to help you Start Growing! There's still so much we have to cover. So lets get cracking!

Continue on to read [Start Growing! Part 4](#)

Start Growing! Part 4: Have You Considered SPIN Farming?

Posted August 1, 2014 by [Fraser Bliss](#) & filed under [Commercial Farm Projects](#), [Markets & Outlets](#), [Urban Projects](#).

In previous parts of the Start Growing! series, we've talked about [how to buy a farm debt-free](#), even [without money](#), and how we should [value our time](#) if we're going to be financially sustainable.

Did you know that's what [SPIN Farming](#) is about?

When I first heard of it I falsely assumed it was something like square-foot gardening with a twist.

Nope. Not even close.

SPIN Farming stands for Small Plot INtensive Farming. But it isn't a method of agriculture. It's a business model.





Roxanne Christensen, co-founder of SPIN Farming, explains it like this:

It produces the net income levels of traditional farming, while eliminating much of its costs, complexity and uncertainty. — *Scaling Up* by Roxanne Christensen

Fantastic!

We all know that karma doesn't pay the rent.

Since SPIN Farming is a business model, you can easily pair it with your growing method of choice — permaculture, biodynamic, rotational grazing, bio-intensive... it's up to you. It lets you get started on the cheap and gives you the recipe for how to earn \$50,000 on half an acre on land that you don't even own.



It gives you another reason to start today instead of tomorrow so we can quit the rat race and do what we love.

If you already SPIN Farm, do share your experiences below for the benefit of all.

Further Reading/Watching:

- [Look Mom, There's a Farmer in Our Back Yard](#)
- [BK Farmyards – a Subversive Urban Farming Concept](#)

Start Growing! Part 5: The Best Employee For Your Farm or Food Hub

Posted August 7, 2014 by [Fraser Bliss](#) & filed under [Markets & Outlets](#), [Village Development](#).



Imagine that your small farm or food hub just hired a new employee. Her name is Susan. But she's not just any employee, she's an electronic one.

Susan's the best you've ever hired. She does exactly as instructed. She works 24x7, 365 days a year. She's never grumpy, never calls in sick and never gets tired. She never takes shortcuts and her wage is only pennies per hour.

You're so happy because while you're out there doing "real work", Sue is happily telling your customers about how great your farm is and she's busily taking orders with about as much enthusiasm as you do. Your customers love her too because she does house calls and they can order your fresh food from the comfort of their own living room.

You wish all employees were like her.

Sue is your personal secretary too. She takes messages, sorts and files documents, and gives you reminders. She's got a photographic memory too. Ask her about your business and you'll get the full report. Sue even does the dishes. Oh wait, that's her cousin Dave the Dishwasher, silly me.

What about farmers' markets?

Compare that to farmers' markets where you have to guess how much you might sell. You pack the truck the night before and wake up at the crack of dawn using a quarter tank of gas to drive an hour into town with an employee. Your best customers also have to get up early to make sure they get the best stuff and an hour after the market bell you've sold 70% of what you're going to sell for the day.

Then you sell a few apples to a nice gal walking her little chihuahua, and half a watermelon to a young couple with ice cream in one hand and a baby carriage in the other. Four hours

later you pack the gear and unsold food back into the truck and drive home exhausted. You and your family eat as much unsold produce as you can, but it soon goes to the chickens.

You pulled in \$750 which feels nice, but then there's the \$50 market fee, the \$100 you paid your employee and filling up the truck wasn't cheap either. You know you should take at least a couple of hundred for your own time, but after paying the farm's bills, their ain't much left over.

Instead, wouldn't it be nice if you always know exactly how much to harvest because your customers pre-order and you head out with a full load to hit a bunch of delivery sites in a few hours?

This is an excerpt from Day 2 of the 7-day *free* online course called [The Smart Farmer's Guide to Selling Online](#).

This totally free course takes the mystery out of “e-commerce” and teaches local farmers and food hubs what they need to know to setup an online shop — without any technical mumbo jumbo, and regardless of which software they use.