



SPIN in the City

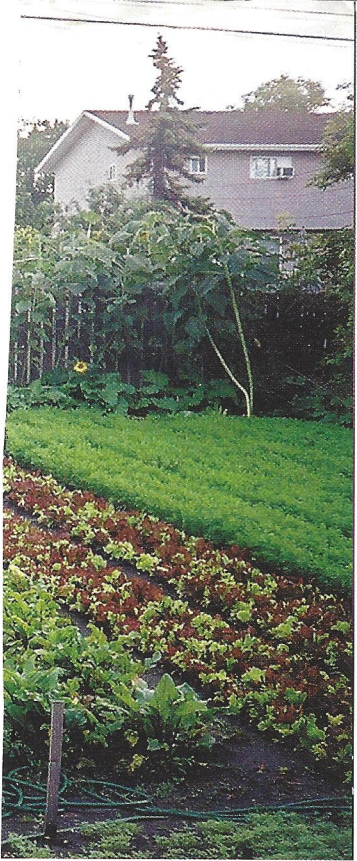
A New Form of Farming That Can Transform Cities

Using the SPIN model, growing ranks of the green-thumbed in North American cities and towns are becoming farmers, raising and selling organic produce on sub-acre backyard plots or vacant lots. In so doing, they're setting the stage for sustainable, local-foods economies—one city and one farm at a time.

SPIN, which stands for Small Plot Intensive relay farming, downsizes traditional organic farming methods and combines them with a franchise-like business formula. Invented by Canadian farmers Wally Satzewich and Gail Vandersteen in the mid-1990s, it's based on sequentially raising a variety of rapidly growing, highly marketable crops among multiple small (2' x 25") growing beds. The idea is to generate maximum edible output using minimal space, simple tools and the municipal water supply. All planting, weeding, pest management and harvesting are done by hand. In this way, a tiny team can raise tons of produce, then sell it directly to the community it serves.

Through strategic crop-selection, growing and revenue-targeting techniques, the goal is to generate approximately \$100 per crop per bed. With about 200 beds per half-acre and up to four rotations per plot, it is theoretically possible to gross up to \$120,000 a year, according to a feasibility study funded by Pennsylvania's Department of Community and Economic Development. Startup costs range from \$10,000 to \$25,000 and farmers typically work 30 to 60 hours a week. Friends Martin Barrett, 42, and Dan Bravin, 38, of Portland, Oregon, started their

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© PHOTOS: WALLY SATZEWICH; CITY GARDEN FARMS

A SPIN farm in Canada (above); A farm stand at Brick City Urban Farms in New Jersey.



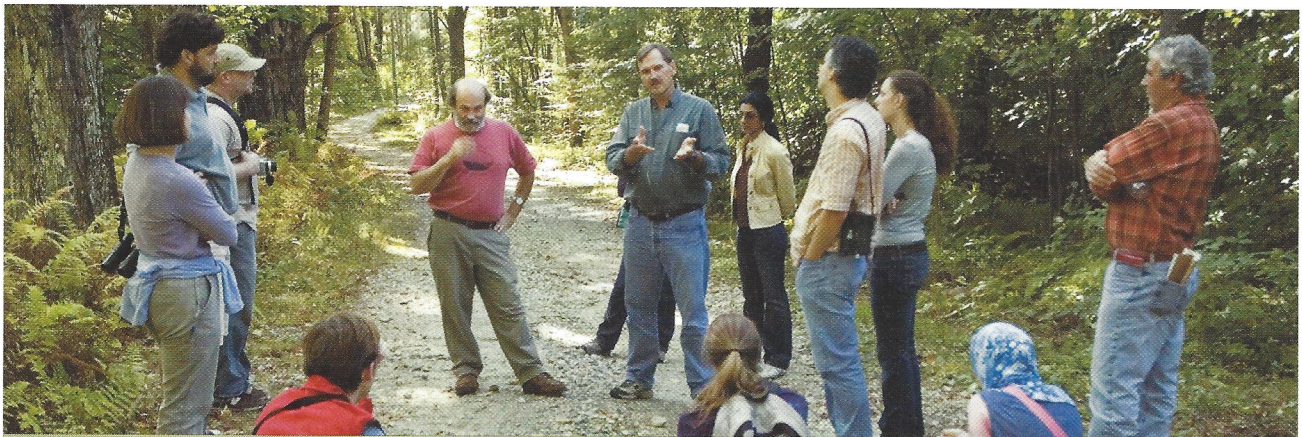
City Garden Farms in fall 2007. SPIN farming “fit a niche that was missing in our plan,” says Bravin. “I had gardening skills, Martin had business experience, but we didn’t know how to scale it up or set prices.” They expect to sell \$24,000 in Community Supported Agriculture shares this year from their half-acre farm, which spans their yard and the yards of 10 neighbors recruited from a post on the classifieds website Craigslist.org. A former database manager and veteran gardener, Bravin farms full time, doing about 85% of the physical labor, while Barrett, a bookstore manager, mostly runs the business side. City

Garden takes advantage of Portland’s mild climate and lenient residential-property-use regulations.

Satzewich and Vandersteen, who run Wally’s Market Garden, sell salad greens, rainbow carrots and about 20 other “high value” veggies at a weekly farmers’ market in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in Canada and to restaurants. They earned tens of thousands last year over a 40-week growing period. Their “farm” is three-quarters of an acre cobbled together from patches of lawns rented from or donated by five separate homeowners in Saskatoon and seven plots (including some farmland) in the nearby village of Pleasantdale.

The couple, who have farmed as many as 30 small parcels at a time, devised their technique after running a conventional 20-acre farm. Eventually they realized their city garden was more profitable and easier to manage. “I asked myself, how can I make [city farming] worth my while?” says Satzewich. “I spent a lot of time making charts and crunching numbers.”

Those concepts have been codified in a series of how-to guides written by Satzewich with Roxanne Christensen, former director of the nonprofit Institute for Innovations in Local Farming (IILF), now sold on the SPIN Farming website. Some 2,300 guides have



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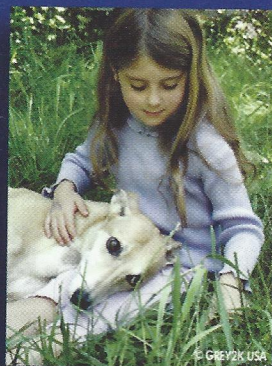


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SPIN and its spin-offs fit the general downsizing trend in American farming.

been downloaded to date. The two have held several workshops around the country and there's a 400-member Google group for current and would-be sub-acre farmers.

Despite its precise formulas and templates, SPIN is very versatile, compatible with all sorts of farming—biodynamic, permaculture, no-till—anywhere there is land and customers hungry for fresh, locally grown food. As Satzewich says, "It's about principles. It's not a religion."

Indeed, new farms have been applying SPIN principles in a variety of creative ways. John Taylor, 44, of Princeton Junction, New Jersey, formerly a development officer for a charter school, was called to urban farming in his hometown of Newark in response to the city's lack of access to fresh produce and its

proliferation of vacant lots. His partner, Lorraine Gibbons, 52, a former dance company director and Master Gardener, turned him on to SPIN, and in 2008 they started Brick City Urban Farms. Situated in a lot provided by Newark's Lincoln Park Coast Culture District, the farm sells veggies like collard greens and okra that cater to the tastes of the city's largely African-American community.

But because Newark's soil is polluted—"It's really one big brownfield," says Taylor—Brick City practices a sort of SPIN-mobile. They plant their crops aboveground in "EarthBoxes," self-contained, window-box-like units with a built-in irrigation and fertilization system, which fit 10 to a SPIN standard bed. Next year, when the current site is slated for a LEED-certified housing development, they'll pick up and move the farm to a permanent site two blocks away.

In their trial year, they invested \$20,000 in startup costs and sold 20,000 pounds of food and expect to earn a profit this year. They ultimately hope to sell \$150,000 per acre on at least five acres of city land, so they can accept food stamps.

SPIN is even being used in the coun-

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The EarthBox is a self-contained unit with built-in irrigation and fertilization.

try. Peggy Hanson, a 90-something-year-old widow in rural Illinois, earns supplementary income from the surplus vegetables she and a partner grow on a one-acre plot of a 60-acre tree farm. She's sold her Indian Trail Farm Produce online since 2006. A SPIN farm "is like World War II victory garden," she says.

SPIN and its spin-offs fit the general downsizing trend in American farming. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2007 Census of Agriculture, "New farms tend to have more diversified production, fewer acres, lower sales and younger operators." Moreover, notes Christensen, SPIN farming is being done "without any major policy changes or any government support. It's totally entrepreneurial in nature."

Of course, SPIN does have its limitations: Not everyone is cut out for the outdoor lifestyle and physical exertion involved. Bravin notes, "I lost 20 pounds last summer! But it's not so much heavy lifting as constant movement." Taylor cautions, "It's not a turnkey thing," adding that because the concept is still foreign to banks, it can be challenging to get a small-business loan. Zoning rules may also pose a problem. It all comes down to motivation, says Satzewich: "You'll do all the work. It's very dependent on you."

But Christensen is optimistic, saying, "As cities realize the potential and the need for sustainability, they'll begin to look at food production as part of their infrastructure." **E**

CONTACTS: EarthBox, www.earthbox.com; SPIN Farming, www.spinfarming.com. —Miranda C. Spencer

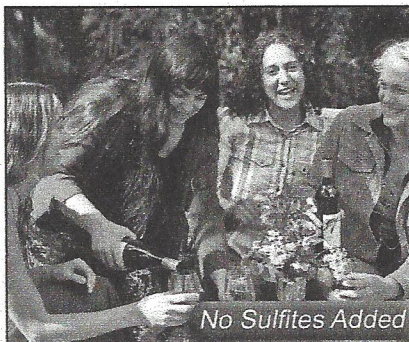


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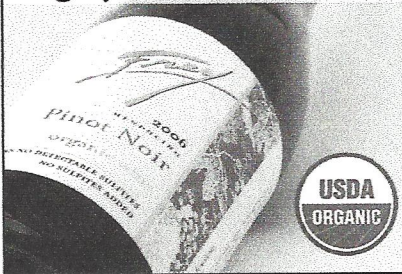
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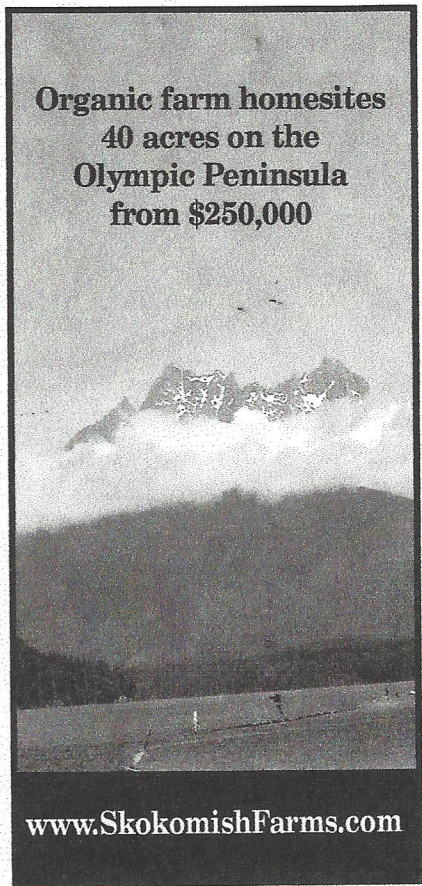


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