

The Urban Farmer: Growing Food for Profit on Leased and Borrowed Land Curtis Stone

More than delivers on the promise of urban farming –offers a useful philosophy as well

Curtis Stone succeeds extraordinarily well in the primary objective of this book. It is an attempt to tell the reader how to establish an urban farm. As the table of contents below indicates, he covers just about every aspect of the question. How to acquire the needed resources: urban land, primarily lawns and some equipment. He advises how to locate customers. He advises what crops to grow.

The book is intensely practical. Although he is known as "the bike farmer" in this Canadian town where he lives, and thus might be taken for a counter-culture sort, he is very forthright in saying that this identity is a marketing tool. It identifies him to his customers, and a bicycle is the cheapest means of transportation. The book is relentlessly focused on the bottom line rather than being wedded to any idealistic principles. Farming is a business, and he tells you how to optimize every aspect of the operation to make it profitable.

Obviously, locally grown organic food appeals to a well-defined sector of the population. Call them crunchy cons, yuppies, urban aesthetes, or whatever one calls them, anybody familiar with the American or Canadian social scene will recognize his customer base. There are people who did not want mass-produced, mass marketed food, and are willing to pay a premium for fresh, pure, locally grown produce. Stone serves three sets of customers: local farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture, and restaurants. Community supported agriculture (CSA) are groups in the community that contract with a grower such as Stone to take produce over the course of a growing season or year. This provides a steady customer base and some predictability. The other outlets being more profitable, Stone devotes more space to describing how to establish oneself with farmers markets and restaurants.

Stone starts with several key insights. The first is that there is a broad market in North America for the kind of high quality, organic produce he is able to grow. The second insight is that lawns are a vast underused resource. There are 40 million acres of lawn in America. They account for between 30 and 60 percent of urban water use, and take a lot of time and gasoline to mow. Moreover, many homeowners see them as a pain and bother. Many lawn owners are happy to allow an urban farmer to use the land in exchange for some produce. A third is that urban land is very close to the end consumer. A crop can go from field to table in a day. A fourth insight is that cities have their own ecology. There are warmer and better protected from wind than rural farms. Stone's approach all of these advantages to form a profitable business.

The most amazing observation I found in the book is how little land it takes to succeed in urban farming. A half-acre is the most area he discusses in the book. Even that small amount, he observes, requires hired help according to his system. Observe that quarter acre lots are extremely common in the suburbs, and you can conclude that it is not difficult to satisfy the land requirements.

Going to the bottom line, Stone writes about generating incomes in the five figure range, comparable with teachers and other professionals who will be among his customers. I will venture some observations that Stone only implies. A five figure income to an urban farmer is a lot more than it is to a teacher. The urban farmer doesn't need to spend a lot of money on clothes, a car to get to and from work, and the other trappings of a professional life. Being reliant on a bicycle (perhaps battery assisted, to pull around a Rototiller on a trailer) is an immediate money saver. A social life is built-in to an urban farmer's life. He is in constant contact with neighbors, chefs, customers in the farmers market. Stone writes that he is often called upon to speak to community organizations. In the words of Nicholas Nassim Taleb he is "anti-fragile." He can handle customers coming and going, and he does not have a foundation of debt to be serviced. In fact, Stone is rather adamant on the subject of debt: don't use it.

There is a lot of value in the book even to somebody who does not want to implement Stone's model. I live on a third of an acre in Kyiv, Ukraine. We do not have the yuppie restaurant market here. You could never get seven dollars a pound

for fresh spinach – one or two is more like it. However, the book will be useful to me in planning how to lay out our garden plots, how to use plastic tunnels to extend the growing season, how to control pests and weeds, and how to decide what to plant. I would recommend it to almost any gardener. Stone's bottom line perspective is useful even if you are only deciding what to grow for your own use.

Stone writes about the qualities one looks for in an employee "Paying for labor is worth it only if it allows you to do tasks that cannot be delegated as easily." He comes across as a fair boss, but not one who is in any way committed to socialist notions. Using an employee is a business decision. If they don't contribute to the bottom line, you don't need them.

An assessment of the capital that Stone himself brings to the business is illuminating. In terms of financial capital he is talking about \$10,000, give or take. In terms of the human capital that he himself evidently brings, it includes yeoman farmer attributes that we would all like to impute to our ancestors, but we have to observe are rather rare today. Here is the human capital that Stone himself appears to possess:

- An innate sense of entrepreneurship. He looks for opportunities, and assesses each situation in terms of possible benefit.
- Hard work. Stone finds what he is doing interesting and is willing to put the time and to make it successful.
- Facility with tools. Like any farmer, Stone has to invent, construct, repair, and jury-rig equipment to get the job done.
- Gregariousness. Throughout Stone's day he comes in contact with many, many potential customers, and has the patience and the graciousness to talk with all of them.
- Fairness. He does what it takes to be fair to customers, employees, and all around him.
- Curiosity. Stone acquires the knowledge he shares in this book by talking to people, reading, and tinkering and figuring things out.
- Facility with numbers. Stone describes how he uses spreadsheets extensively to plan his operations and record his outcomes.
- Facility with language. He is in constant communication.
- Facility with computers and technology. This is essential to support work with numbers and language in today's world.

Stone's background prior to farmin would not at first appear promising. He concluded after a decade and a half as a rock musician that that was not going to be his profession, so he looked for something he could do. He credits his father with an entrepreneurial streak that the sun seems to have inherited. So, on the one hand, he started from nothing: no education in farming, no real experience, and precious little capital. On the other hand, in terms of human capital he was extremely well endowed. He had what it took to succeed.

Stone's story is a parable for Millennial youth. These kids emerge from the University chock-full of formal education but with no practical experience, and quite specifically, little notion of the fact that one earns a living by providing the kinds of goods and services that people are willing to pay for. What a blessing it would be to a 16-year-old with no discernible direction in life to get involved in something basic like urban farming and learn the self-discipline and the talents required to make a success of this fairly basic undertaking. It would prepare one for life. In our yeoman farmer ancestors, such a basic understanding of how things work was implicit. Stone provides a recipe for going back to these fundamental values.

It is a five-star effort all around. The table of contents below gives you an idea of the breadth and depth of the book.

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