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How to Earn a Living Installing Productive Home Food Gardens

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A good living can be made by installing, for both suburban and rural people, productive home food gardens. In Sacramento, California, we created a business doing just that, which we call *Foodscares Organic*. Foodscares Organic has been in business since 1992, employing three to eight casuals and bringing in an average gross income of \$2,100 per week. (For the purpose of this paper, all money quoted is in US dollars.) When we first came up with the idea, many friends had words of discouragement for us, believing there was no market for such a service. They suggested we grow vegetables for sale. Foodscares Organic differs from market gardening in that it solves the problem of domestic food security at its root. Abundant vegies, herbs and fruits come marching into the kitchen directly from the backyard. This approach, we feel, is far more liberating and empowering for the individuals who employ our service.

Foodscares Organic offers design and installation of biointensive and permaculture systems. Garden bed work is costed and charged on a square foot basis, \$3.50 – \$5.50 per square foot, which includes soil amendments (compost and organic fertilisers), plants, seeds and labour. These beds maximize floristics by containing up to 40% flowering plants and herbs to provide food and habitat for beneficial insects. They are planted in such a way that they are truly beautiful and colourful. Pruning is charged on an hourly basis, \$35.00 for the first person and \$15.00 for each additional person, plus a fee for hauling away debris. Irrigation service and installation is costed and charged on an hourly fee of \$45.00 per hour for the first person and \$15.00 for each additional person, plus a materials fee.

This service begins with a consultation appointment with the prospective client, charged at \$45.00 an hour; the first hour including a soil analysis from the site, which you take to your little lab set-up in the garage, and the result is mailed to the customer. These basic soil testing kits are available from Lamott Company for around \$36.00. It takes about 15 minutes to do one, including cleanup, and you can analyze up to six in under an hour. The soil is tested for macro nutrients N, P, K and pH. The results of this basic analysis are used to calculate the amounts

of the macro nutrients, per square foot, to be applied to the garden bed or beds. Kelp meal is applied at a rate of .03 lbs per square foot to supply micro nutrients and trace elements. By using this approach, we are assured the garden beds have the necessary nutrients for optimum production. The area is carefully measured and your estimate is written on the bottom of your first invoice for the consultation appointment. Good educational aids include a picture book containing before and after pictures of your work (even if it is your own yard) and a local planting calendar which helps the planning process. Careful analysis of the client's experience and ability will help you gauge the size garden they can manage effectively for maximum success. Keep it simple for new gardeners, for they will reward you with abundant expansion work as their confidence and experience grow.

Successful food production on every installation is mandatory. Sometimes you do find an unsuitable site you just know won't work; the soils too heavy or toxic, not enough sunlight, or the client is noticeably unmotivated, or like, they have a bunch of big dogs galloping around the place and indicate "they won't be a problem." Forget it! Unsuccessful installations cause more harm than good.

To get this good business off the ground you need to define what it is you are offering, carefully cost all aspects of installation and set your price so you are delivering a great product and making a profit doing it. Once you've done that, write up a brochure about your business and a local planting guide. You are now ready to develop a press release about your service which is mailed to the editor of every paper and magazine and the news desks of local radio and TV stations in your district. When they phone you for an interview, you are ready to discuss your service. Keep your interviews simple and to the point, stressing the angle of your work. Journalists will print anything you say. I once heard of a couple who were giving an interview about their permaculture landscaping business. The journalist led the conversation into a discussion about how the couple met and, bang, the headline read something like "Great Sex Ignites Permaculture Relationship." The slant of the article was more about the couple than their business. You'll soon discover articles about unique services doing good work get printed. Program into your work quarterly press releases featuring up-dates about your service and new services and equipment you are offering. Soon you will be approached to write articles for local publications and this you do gladly in exchange for ad space next to your article; and do some work for the editor. We often receive thousands of dollars worth of advertising for a couple of hundred dollars work. An early morning garden spot soon becomes available and then the TV evening news, after seeing your press releases for the last three years, wants to tape a segment on what you do.

Working with clients is fun and rewarding. During your first appointment find out all you can about their gardening experience, what they like to eat, time constraints, and site history. This activity, coupled with education about the process, results in all parties making well-informed decisions about the size of the garden which would be best for them, and what to grow there. Always do your job as you described. What you don't tell the client, which leaves them with a warm feeling for you and your team is: part of your program is to deliver a bit more than you promised and leave the site in a better condition than you found it by fixing leaking hoses and pipes, thoroughly sweeping paved areas, neatly arranging their hoses and picking up any trash.

The essential tools needed include: a vehicle capable of carrying up to four people with room for plants and a strong motor to pull a trailer carrying up to three tons of materials and tools. We use a Jeep Cherokee and the trailer just mentioned. Good quality tools cannot be over-emphasized. We use English-made, Bull Dog and Spear and Jackson brand digging tools. We carry tool buckets filled with everything we'd possibly need, including a tool-sharpening kit. Keeping a list handy assures you won't forget something. Many times when you are on-site, a client will ask you to do something more for them; if you have the tools on board, you've just increased your income by providing an additional service at next to no additional cost for you because you and your team are already there.

The outdoor area of site you work from can be as small as 30m by 16m. There, seedlings are propagated according to your calendar. This is an essential component to the service. It is difficult to work without seedlings on hand, and purchasing them is generally unreliable and costly. Seedlings should be on an automatic watering system. A plant propagation area and nursery should have a supply of flats, plastic pots and potting soil. Seeds and records are kept and up-dated. Organic compost and mulching materials will need to be stored on-site as well as quantities of organic fertilisers. Find out what is available in your local area. We use feather meal, soft rock phosphate, greensand, potash, oyster shell lime and kelp meal, to name a few. Find a place to set up your mini soil testing lab, store irrigation equipment, store and maintain tools, set up a scale to weigh fertilisers for jobs and store boxes and bags to put the fertiliser into for transport.

At first, not much office space is needed (a corner of the bedroom will do) but a phone answering machine is critical to have. Making a habit of returning your calls will reward you. Many jobs are performed running a business like this, and as it grows, they can be delegated to others and additional income is raised through these endeavors. They include, but are not limited to: installations of gardens, mini farms, automated drip irrigation, ponds and orchards; services of consulting, designing, soil testing, pruning, construction and hauling; sales of plants, soil amendments, tools and irrigation equipment; and education, conducting workshops on everything from cooking to pruning, tours of work and trade shows; bookkeeping and marketing. In the beginning, the owner or owners of such a business wear many hats. It requires dedication and attention to detail. Working with a partner that will enable the two of you to split up the duties, each focussing on their strong areas, is so much nicer.

Finally, such work is 'right livelihood,' as it provides domestic food security and excellent nutrition in several hundred households a year, while also bringing great pleasure to workers and clients alike.