

Module 1: Setting Goals - Sattin Hill Farm Course

Introduction

Welcome to the Sattin Hill Farm Course!

This course is designed for aspiring backyard homesteaders, gardeners, market farmers, and basically anyone interested in growing their own food!

Within this course you will learn all of the systems and techniques that Josh Sattin has refined on his successful no-till market garden. Josh's farm is located in Raleigh, North Carolina (zone 7b) on a two-acre lot. With just under an eighth of an acre in production, you'll be amazed with what he is able to produce in such a small space.

As you work through the course, remember that all of Josh's systems might not translate exactly to your specific context, so focus on the principles and concepts, and how they might work for you. There are so many different ways to approach farming. These are the methods Josh has found to work for him in his context.

Josh's Story

When Josh and his family moved to their two-acre suburban lot in Raleigh, North Carolina, they wanted to start growing some of their own food in hopes of living a little more sustainably. However, Josh is the kind of person that goes all in on whatever he's doing. He bought chickens and started setting up a small market garden for vegetable production. In a short period of time, the food they were producing was way too much for their own family.

Friends and neighbors began offering to buy the produce, so Josh started a vegetable delivery box program, kind of like a CSA, but week to week. It was a crash course in farming, business, and marketing all at once! He initially used Instagram to market his farm, and then in his second season (2019) he started a YouTube channel to respond to the growing volume of growing questions from his followers. Since the beginning, finding the balance between farming and YouTubing has been the challenge.

At the end of 2019 a local non-profit urban farm in Raleigh offered Josh the position of farm manager. He accepted, and in 2020 he helped them to rebuild their farm from the ground up, incorporating all of the systems he had implemented on his own farm. While it was a wonderful experience, at the end of that year Josh decided to return to his home farm, preferring the for-profit model when it comes to small-scale farming. When he did so, he redesigned his home farm completely. He has now simplified it to three 14x100 foot caterpillar tunnels and a nursery greenhouse, with no animals. This simplified operation allows him to farm part-time, still growing and selling food every single week, while also pursuing his film making.

2022 marks the beginning of his fifth growing season. After three opportunities to build a farm now, Josh has refined his systems and is excited to share with you the fruit of his efforts!

Homesteading, Farmsteading, and Farming

Homesteading, as Josh did when he first started out, is where you are growing supplemental food for your family and maybe some friends. But the emphasis is not on selling your products. Some people take this much further and grow the majority of their food, or even all their food! At this level there is generally surplus, which leads to the question of whether or not to begin selling your product. Selling the surplus at a farmers market for some additional income is what Josh calls “farmsteading.” However, if your goal is to take it to the next level you must view your farm as a business.

Clarify Your Goals

If your goal is to homestead, or even farmstead, that’s great! The important thing is to make sure your goals are clear, and that they make sense for your family’s finances. If you're considering farming as a business, you will need some capital to start. This will require more than just a few thousand dollars. You’ll need to invest in infrastructure, building your business, marketing, and all of the other expenses that come along with starting a viable business.

It’s also important to consider the possibility that this might not end up being what you want to do, and the only way to find that out is to actually do it. You’ll be learning as you go, and that is okay! Starting off with homesteading or farmsteading is a great way to do this without so much investment all at once. You’ll be slowly building up your equity in the infrastructure before taking on any debt.

Farming as a Business

For a farm to be sustainable, it has to be a sustainable business. Unless you’re independently wealthy, if you’re not making a profit from your farming endeavors, you won’t be farming for very long. Focusing on productivity and valuable time saving techniques can make it possible for you to actually support a family through small scale farming!

It’s important to write a business plan, but don't get hung up on the format. Simply going through the exercise will allow you to determine what's important, and how it's going to work. Putting this into writing is extremely valuable. Perhaps the most valuable is creating a spreadsheet and working through profit and loss. Look at your inputs, your outputs, and your labor. That's when you can start figuring out if the business is going to work or not. This is the first thing to do before putting any money, time, or energy into the businesses. Figure out if this is actually going to make you money, and be realistic about your expectations. The worst thing you can do is to think you're going to be hugely profitable in a best case scenario, and then come to find out that it wasn’t once you got started.

Ask for help about things that you don't understand. Hire a consultant if you feel like you need one. The amount of information you can get out of one knowledgeable person in an hour is well worth the cost. It will save you so much money and frustration down the road.

Farming is a Lifestyle

Another important thing to remember is that farming is not just a business, it's also a lifestyle. When you start growing things, you are tied to the farm. You are going to be doing something on the farm every single day, no matter what. And if you go away, someone has to take care of it for you. That means taking less vacations. It means working on holidays and in bad weather. These are just the realistic considerations you have to think about when you start relying on income from your farm.

The Important Questions When Setting Goals

- 1) **How much money do I actually need to make?** Make sure you are realistic about how much income you need and do some actual calculations. There is no right or wrong answer here.
- 2) **Is this going to be part-time income or full-time income?** For Josh, farming couldn't be full time because he also does YouTube and videography work, along with the responsibilities of being a husband and father. He's figured out a way to work 15-20 hours a week on the farm. This can look different for everyone. If you're younger, you can work a full-time job and have all the energy to work early in the morning, late at night, and on the weekends. There's a lot of strategy involved, but the important thing is to be realistic with where you are at.
- 3) **What are the short-term and long-term goals?** What are your goals for year one, year two, and year three? It's helpful to write these down, brainstorm, and show them to other people. Share your goals with your partner, your spouse, or your friends, and get some feedback.
- 4) **Do you want to keep the farm small, or do you plan on scaling it up?** If you are planning on scaling up in the near future, you'll need to make sure you have the space to do so. Setting up your site with this in mind will save you a lot of time and money in the long run. Moving your entire operation to a larger site can be stressful and expensive. Starting off in a space with room to grow (if possible) is ideal.
- 5) **Do you want to increase the acreage?** When considering how much acreage you want to farm, begin with considering what you are able to manage. Small scale bio-intensive farming can produce extremely high yields from surprisingly small spaces, but it does require intense management to keep it all running smoothly. Overextending yourself right out of the gate can lead to burn out. Remember, Josh only farms $\frac{1}{8}$ of an acre!
- 6) **Do you want to have employees?** While employees allow you the freedom to do other things, they also bring paperwork and legal issues to consider. In addition, managing other people is a different skill set than managing vegetables by yourself. Make sure you are up for the challenge before you begin.

- 7) **Do you want to be more of a manager, or keep your hands in the dirt?** You might learn that managing people is your strong suit, and decide to delegate more and more field responsibilities to your employees. However, if you do want to keep your hands in the dirt, you may need to partner with someone who excels in the managerial roles. Or if you keep it small enough, you can just do it all like Josh!
- 8) **Do you want to sell at a farmer's market, have an online store, an on-site farm store, a CSA?** There are so many different avenues to market and sell your produce. Figuring out the best ones for your specific farm will depend so much on your context. Many farmers are shifting to online stores and weekly subscription models. Do some research and find out your best fit.

Appropriate Tools

As you're putting your farm business together, you'll need to research the best tools and equipment. Josh highly recommends Paperpot Co. They sell really high-quality tools that are both time and labor-saving. They are a trusted supplier with great customer service. There's also some excellent educational resources on their website to help provide a road map for new growers.

As you're creating your list of tools to buy, use the "appropriate technology" principle. What tools make sense for your context and your scale? There are a lot of shiny bells and whistles on the market in the small farm space, but discipline yourself to only get what you need as you're starting out. Start slow, start small. Are you going to take the no-till approach? If so, this will have a big impact on what kind of tools and machinery you buy.

It's also a good idea to invest just a little more and buy tools that are built to last. Whether it's nursery trays, broadforks, seeders, or whatever other tools you're considering, there are a lot of products out there that will end up breaking down after one season. Instead of replacing cheap products every year, spend a little extra and buy the ones that will last a lifetime. These tools will also hold better resale value if you end up deciding farming isn't for you.

Start with Part Time Farming

A lot of people don't have access to capital when starting up their farm business. If this is your scenario, you need to know how to bootstrap your farm. While it might require a little more work and extra hours, it's not impossible.

When you're really eager to do something and you don't have the capital, it's going to require your time. Josh recommends starting part-time with the farmstead model, or just a small farm business if you're not relying on the income. This could potentially be done in conjunction with another 40-hour/week job. Start small, and build up. Learn the craft of growing food and get good at it. Slowly build up infrastructure. Slowly start selling your produce.

All the money that you make from your budding farm business can then be reinvested into infrastructure, more tunnels, more composts, better tools, etc. Starting small and building just what you need will get your business going. It may take a few years, but it will grow if you stick with it.

It's during that season of part-time farming that you are able to determine if this is something you love, or not. Maybe it's time to pursue it full time, or maybe you've learned this isn't for you. Maybe you've learned you just don't have a knack for this. Maybe you made some guesses about your local market and have learned it's not really able to support what you are doing. These are all reasons why starting part-time makes so much sense.

Josh has calculated that he can buy a 100' caterpillar tunnel, plus compost and irrigation, and everything else needed to start growing in one of these tunnels for \$3,000. So for less than \$10,000, you could have two or three tunnels, the tools, the wash/pack station, and everything you need to get started. While that may not provide you a full time income, it will allow you to pay yourself back within a year plus some additional income to reinvest in the farm.

Before you begin, do some market research and think about your sales outlets. Think about where you are, what local market prices are for the kind of produce you want to sell, and calculate how much income you could actually make.

Finding Land

Do you have access to enough land? If you're in an urban setting, are there land owners willing to let you use their land in trade for supplying them fresh organic produce? Bartering is always a great arrangement if possible. Maybe there's a church or a school nearby that's not using some land. Maybe there's a symbiotic relationship with that organization, too, and you can provide food or education or things like that. If you really want to do this, there are ways to find land. You don't need a lot of space to get started. Remember, Josh farms on less than an eighth of an acre, so you don't need much. When considering a piece of land, don't forget to do your research on local laws and regulations concerning zoning.

Marketing

Are you someone who can market the products from your farm? A lot of farmers really do enjoy the growing aspect of farming part of it, but aren't very comfortable getting in front of customers and selling it. If that's you, you'll need to find someone to assist with that. Part of being a small scale farmer is figuring out how to sell directly to the customer, and marketing the products as well.

Whether you like it or not, social media is also another important part of small scale farming right now. Regular posting on Instagram and Facebook will help to connect you with your customers, other farmers for sharing tips and tricks, and spreading awareness of you and your story. Sharing your farm journey through pictures and videos can be your greatest marketing tool.

Upfront Work Pays Off Later

Set up systems early. Make sure those systems can be grown into, adapting as the farm expands. The more work you do upfront, means less work day-to-day and week-to-week down the line. All of the work Josh put in upfront to create the systems for his wash/pack station, tools, soil management, infrastructure, irrigation, and everything else is what has allowed him to run his farm so efficiently every day.

The no-till approach to farming is built around this concept of putting the work in up front, so that you have a lot less energy to spend moving forwards when beds are established. Adding a large volume of organic material to your beds is labor intensive at the beginning, but with each passing year the soil will just get better and better, and with minimal disturbance the seed bank just gets lower and lower. Regular tillage is not needed in this system. You put in the work to start, and reap the rewards for years to come.

Humble Beginnings

You're going to be a bad farmer at first. It's just part of the learning curve. Your yields are probably going to be a third of what you expect them to be in the first year. But with every season that goes by, you get better and better. There will always be crop losses, and unexpected curve balls.

Don't compare yourself to the seasoned professionals you see on Instagram. You'll hear them talking about their yields and their profit per acre. You have to be okay with the fact that you're not going to be anywhere close to that for a while. It took them many years to get to where they are. Be realistic with how much you can grow and how much you can sell, and scale back your expectations when you're starting.

Gardening vs. Farming

If you are a backyard gardener thinking about farmsteading or farming, know that the skills will not translate exactly. There are a lot of great skills you can acquire from gardening, but when you start doing it at scale and begin planting so many plants in a small space, there are different issues that arise. Just because you are a good gardener does not necessarily mean you will be a good farmer. And if you're a good farmer, you may not be a great gardener!

Regardless of your context, the most important thing is to start growing food. If you are gardening, make sure you're trying out a lot of different kinds of crops, learning what grows well in your area, what you like to grow, what people want to buy, and what your family likes to eat. Start now, because it's going to take a lot of experience to get better at those things. Make friends with local farmers in the area. They will tell you so many things that are unique to your area, things you couldn't find on the internet.

Meet your local farmers.

When Josh started his YouTube channel, it was challenging to find information about growing in the south east. That was one of the reasons he wanted to share what he was doing. There was a lot of information coming out of the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast and Canada, but not very much from the south east. Once he started meeting other growers in his area, he could ask them questions and share knowledge.

The best way to meet local farmers is to go to your local farmer's market. Buy some products first and then let them know you're trying to start farming yourself. As long as they aren't extremely busy, they'll typically be happy to talk with you.

If you don't want to just jump right in, another option is to try and find an apprenticeship or volunteer position somewhere. Farmers will often let you come out for a day, a week, or even a month. There are a lot of opportunities out there if you are someone that wants to get some hands-on experience before jumping in.

Conclusion

If you are looking to start a farm business, hopefully this gives you an idea of all the things to research, calculate, and think through. Be realistic and ask those tough questions, because the worst thing would be to get started and fail. We all want to be successful. We want to have a sustainable business, and we want to make money and enjoy what we're doing.