

# Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

## Copycat farmers switch models

The trouble with most small farmers is that they try to imitate the big guys. That's the conclusion of the southern agricultural expert who has developed a plan for those small farmers that will yield big returns.

Booker T. Whatley, of Tuskegee Institute, believes the proper mix of high value crops on as little as 25 acres can produce \$100,000 in annual gross income for the farmer who is willing to work hard and stuck with the plan long enough to allow it to work.

As Whatley sees it, small farmers have hurt themselves by trying to compete in the corn and soybean market. Their volumes are too small, their costs of production too high, and they just don't get the revenue to make a go of it. So what happens—times get tough and the small farmer sells out to a bigger farmer. One more small farm bites the dust. One more food producer heads for the city to find work.

And, of course, there are the part-time small farmers who have already made the choice—they want to live in the country but enjoy the financial security of an off-farm job. But like their big-scale farm neighbors, they too grow corn and soybeans. These crops are easy to manage, require very little labor, fit well into part-time schedule, and they're easy to market. They also provide very little return, with the small-timer being lucky to break even. But what's the difference? He has a city salary and the joys of country living. He doesn't need to show a profit.

There are those small farmers

who want to make a living on the farm. Some now work off the farm, but would like to devote full time to farming. Others are struggling with a small full-time farm and barely hanging on. Still others have younger family members coming on who want to farm.

To all of these Whatley says there is hope, but not with the traditional corn-soybean commitment. The 64-year-old Alabama agriculturist, successor to George Washington Carver, is advocating a labor and land intensive mix of fruit crops and fresh market vegetables designed to complement each other, provide a fairly even labor demand and cash flow, and yield an income that will support a family.

Here's Whatley's plan. Bear in mind he's talking about Alabama agriculture. Some substitutions would undoubtedly be required in this area.

- \*1 acre of bees—60 colonies
  - \*5 acres of sweet potatoes
  - \*5 acres of southern peas and other greens
  - \*5 acres of muscadine grapes
  - \*2 acres of rabbiteye blueberries
  - \*1 acre of strawberries
  - \*1 acre of blackberries
- That account for 20 acres—the

other five acres in Whatley's 25-acre plan would be for farmstead, family garden, etc. And, of course, this system requires several years to get into full swing because of the time required to get some of the fruits into production. It might also require as much as a \$50,000 investment, not counting the land.

A number of Alabama farmers have embarked on the Tuskegee plan, although it's too soon for any of them to have reached the magical \$100,000 gross target. But Whatley assures them it can be done.

"At our test farm at Tuskegee we did much better than that. Our production of berries and sweet potatoes was enough to bring in nearly \$8,000 per acre for some things, more for others," he said.

Whatley believes the acre of bees is necessary for proper pollination of the crops and it returns a nice income. The blueberries, at 25 pounds per plant and 60 cents a pound, produce a \$9,000 per acre income.

Whatley says that once the system is fully operational, a farmer has something to do and something to sell almost every month. That may be a larger commitment than many farmers are willing to make, but the scientist believes it provides a

## Rural Development advisory council meets

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Advisory Council on Rural Development will hold its first meeting April 14-15 in Washington, D.C. The sessions will be public.

Frank W. Naylor, Jr., under secretary of agriculture for small community and rural development, and co-chairman of the council, said the agenda would include various issues affecting smaller communities, such as the impact of new federalism on rural areas.

"The council is expected to play a leading role in assisting USDA's

Office of Rural Development Policy develop hearings and other ways the USDA can determine the needs and desires of rural communities," Naylor said. "In addition, the group will be briefed on regulatory reform and private sector initiatives."

Secretary of Agriculture John R. Block appointed the 22-member council last month, saying: "The council will assist me in identifying rural problems and in supporting administration efforts in rural development groups. It also will provide state and local rural development groups with a forum for the discussion of important issues affecting the lives of rural people."

Block said he would appoint another co-chairperson at a later time. Willard Phillips, Jr., acting director, USDA's Office of Rural Development Policy, will serve as executive secretary to the advisory council.

The council will meet in Room 107-A in USDA's Administration Building, 14th St. and Independence Ave. S.W.

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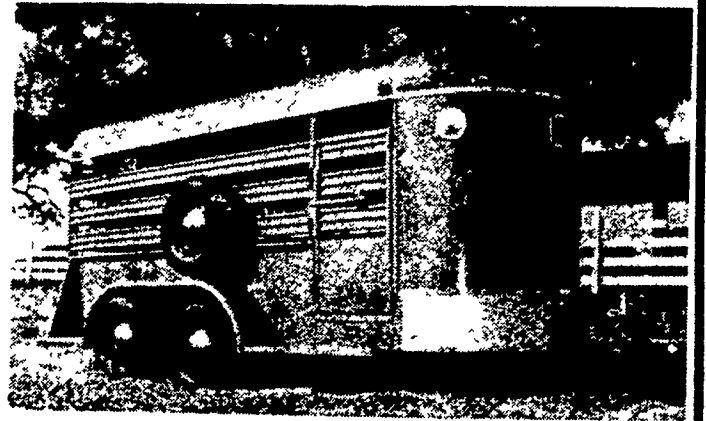
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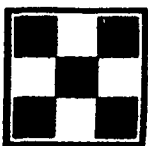
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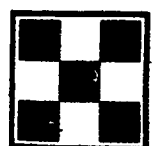
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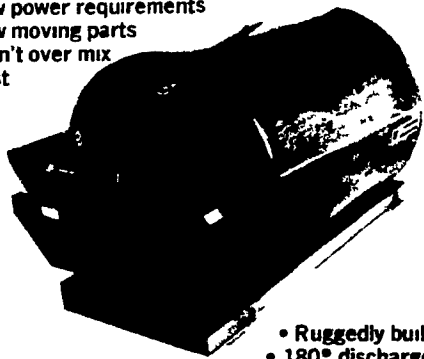


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