



# Living ON Seed Money



Steve and Janelle Sykora are making a full-time living on just seven and one-half acres of land. They grow wildflowers for seed on their small Bloomer, Wisconsin, farm.

"I knew there were farmers working hundreds of acres who weren't making a go of things," Steve says. "That told me I needed to find a specialty crop, something that would give me a high return per acre."

When a friend suggested he could capitalize on the public's growing interest in wildflowers, Steve looked into it and found a seed company in Minnesota that was actively recruiting growers.

He put his first crop in the ground in '97, then waited two years for a harvest. His first crop in the fall of '98 yielded five pounds of seed, a valuable five pounds, but not sufficient to make a living. His seed

crop doubled to 10 pounds the following year, and by the spring of 2000 he took the big leap of faith and quit his day job.

Three years later Steve and Janelle, now married, harvested over 240 pounds of seed from 50 different species of wildflowers, plants with names such as coneflower, obedient plant, large-flowered beard tongue, rattlesnake master, and Indian paintbrush.

The business is extremely labor intensive, with Steve putting in 12-hour days during the growing season and Janelle about four hours a day. "Weeding is the big job," Steve says. "We spend hundreds of hours in the field with the hoe and rototiller."

Most of the seeds have to be collected by hand, a process that involves shaking seeds from the plants into rubber containers. "The plants don't all ripen at the same time. I might go through the same field as many

as 10 times over a period of several weeks to get all the seeds. Their seed crop is sold wholesale on a consignment basis.

The flip side of the high labor requirement is a relatively low capital investment. Their inventory of equipment includes two small tractors, a small plow, a transplanter, a rototiller, hand tools, and a seed cleaner.

As appealing as the venture may sound, Steve and Janelle know few others will attempt to do it. "You have to be willing and able to go two years without an income," Steve says. "I jumped in when I did because I wasn't married at the time and didn't have a family to support.

"We have to accept the fact that we won't get paid for the work we're doing today for another year or two. A lot of people wouldn't find that very appealing." ■

Article and photos by Rick Mooney