RAISING CATTLE ON A FEW ACRES
Eldon Cole, Livestock Specialist
University of Missouri Extension
Mt. Vernon, Missouri

Can you make any money raising beef on a few acres?

1. Some do and some don’t.
2. It depends on the current cattle market.
3. It depends on your debt status.
4. It depends on what your goals and aspirations are.
5. It depends on your management skills.

Don’t expect huge profits from beef operations. Cow-calf costs per head, per year can run from $250 to $700 plus. A lot depends on what you include in your costs. Backgrounding operations rely on buying and selling skills plus market shifts for profits. A $100 per head profit is a goal of many backgrounders. (See attached budgets)

Running beef cattle on an acreage is viewed by many as a desired lifestyle and a way to introduce children or grandchildren to the cattle business so they can grow up with an appreciation for agriculture. 4-H and FFA projects may be an outgrowth of this lifestyle. When these features are considered, “making a profit” can be secondary.

Do you aspire to be a purebred breeder or commercial (feeder) calf producer? Another personal choice, but usually newcomers to the business should stay commercial at least the first few years.

Breed Choice? I’d recommend you choose a breed that’s marketable. More than likely if you crossbreed you’ll use 50% British breeding (Angus, Red Angus, Hereford, Shorthorn) and 50% European or Continental (Charolais, Limousin, Simmental, Gelbvieh, Braunvieh or Salers)

Currently hair color is a driving force in the feeder market with black preferred. Calves don’t have to be black to be marketable. They should be good and remember “it’s what’s under the hide that matters.”

Feeder cattle producers should raise a calf that is similar to their neighbor’s calves for they can be pooled or commingled when sold. This approach to marketing is especially helpful to the small scale producer.

Plan to spend some time at the local cattle sales, both feeder and breeding stock. Take notes on what’s selling well and what’s not. Try to look beyond the hype of some sales and breed promoters. Visit with extension folks in an attempt to obtain unbiased, research-based information. When it comes to marketing, stay in touch with your market representative. When your cattle sell, be there to watch them.

Direct marketing probably isn’t something to jump into if you’re a novice, whether it’s breeding stock or the finished product. However, there are niches that you may choose to explore such as purebred seedstock, show steers, all-natural, grass or grain finished beef, roping calves, bucking bulls, Show-Me-Select Heifers, etc. Study the market and do the best advertising and production practices possible. These niches offer profits, but only to the very best producers.
The first consideration before you buy any cattle is to have something for them to eat. The best cattle producers are the best forage managers. An ambitious goal is to not feed any hay for at least 10 months of the year. Plan to buy hay when needed. One beef cow and her calf require about 3 acres per year.

The quality of forage you grow dictates what type of cattle you should invest in. Fescue, especially old stands that may be infected with the endophyte, are more suitable for cow-calf ventures. Fall calving is recommended as cows will be breeding in cooler weather when fescue endophyte problems are less.

Backgrounders or stockers will need better quality pasture and hay since those animals should be gaining weight every day of their life. Backgrounding means growing a calf from weaning to a weight suitable for entry into the feedlot. Normally the backgrounder period goes from 500 to 800 pounds. Grasses may include (orchard, brome, novel endophyte fescue, bermuda, caucasian bluestem or ryegrass. Clover, lespedeza and alfalfa help also.)

Regardless of the class of cattle you run, plan to rotate pastures, year round, hopefully on a weekly or less basis. Resting pastures helps legume growth. Work to keep legumes in the stand as they dilute fescue toxins, promote better growth and reproduction due to protein, energy and mineral makeup of the forage.

Trips to the feedstore should be minimal if quality forages are produced. Most forages test 10 to 12% protein or better if “harvested” at the right stage. The total digestible nutrient (TDN) level will be correspondingly high. As the plant matures, the feed value drops. Don’t buy a lot of “stuff” you don’t need.

Mineral needs of cattle on a good grass (75%), legume (25%) mix may only be plain white salt. A 50-50 mix of a trace mineral salt and dicalcium phosphate covers most needs. If you’re spending more than $1 per cow, per month on minerals, you’re probably overspending.

Work with your veterinarian on a routine basis to plan the health program you need. If you’re selling a feeder calf right off the cow, consider the total IBR, BVD, etc. package such as the various pharmaceutical companies have. Blackleg vaccination is in order on calves after 2 to 3 months of age up to yearlings.

Castrate calves (knife preferred) early in life as there’s less stress on you and the calf. Dehorn early or use polled bulls. If you’re buying calves to background without knowledge of what shots they’ve had, give them “the works.”

Implants are a personal choice. They do boost growth without question and are very good on steers. With heifers, there could be reproductive problems if implanted heifers are saved for breeding, especially if implanted twice. Implants are a no-no on all-natural programs.

After all is said and done, if southwest Missouri has a comparative advantage over other areas of the country in producing an agriculture product it’s probably beef cattle, specifically cows and calves. Even though our land is not overly fertile and seems high priced, we can still provide a reasonably priced home for a cow compared to other parts of the United States. This is the reason Missouri ranks number 2 in beef cows behind only Texas.