

or clover around my basil as I did this year. Over the course of 10 weeks, I cut the legume strips 3 times with a side-discharge lawnmower when they reached a height of about 8-10 inches, but I found the clippings were better applied by hand after they were bagged instead of blowing them into the basil row. Otherwise the basil leaves developed a blemish where the wet material hit. The weekly soil and basil leaf nitrogen tests showed an increase fairly soon after the wet legumes were applied—2-7 days. My own observation noted that I only had to apply fish emulsion once during the 10 weeks, something I would normally do 4-5 times over the season.

So why not try your hand at a SARE grant? Mine was only 6 pages long, and two of those were budget pages. The four regional SARE offices accept grant applications from farmers to support innovative, exploratory projects to enhance the sustainability of farms and farming. SARE also funds *Research and Education* and *Professional Development* Projects. The timing varies from region to region.

Information at <http://www.sare.org/htdocs/sare/funding.html> or contact Valerie Berton, SARE Communications Specialist, USDA-SARE, 10300 Baltimore Ave., Bldg. 046 BARC West, Beltsville, MD 20705; (301) 504-5230; email <mailto:vberton@wam.umd.edu>.

The *On-Farm Research Guide* is a resource for research design and implementation. PDF format at <http://www.ofrf.org/research/index.html> or by mail from Organic Farming Research Foundation, P.O. Box 440, Santa Cruz, CA 95061 831-426-6606

The Importance of Small Family Farms

More than 60 percent of U.S. farms (which include any enterprise with more than \$1,000 in agricultural sales annually) ended 1998 with a profit, according to USDA Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 768, *Structural and Financial Characteristics of U.S. Farms: 2001 Family Farm Report* By Robert A. Hoppe, editor (May 2001). For the most part, large and very large family farms were viable businesses, but small farms (those with sales of less than \$250,000) were found to be less viable. Most small farms did not report adequate income to cover expenses in 1998. Like their nonfarm counterparts, many farm households are dual income.

Though often unprofitable, the report continues, small farms “remain important to U.S. agriculture.” They accounted for 33 percent of the value of total agricultural production in 1998, and produced larger shares of some commodities. Furthermore, since small farms constitute 91 percent of all farms “they accounted for a large share of assets owned by farms (69 percent) including land (68 percent). As custodians and managers of the bulk of farm assets, small farms play a major role in natural resource and environmental policy.”

An examination of small farm incomes “suggests that lower debt burdens could increase the profitability of small farm operations.” Leased land and equipment could reduce the capital needs of a farm, for example. Also, “Financially successful small farms tend to be more diversified.”

Some other findings:

- Fifty-three percent of all U.S. farms sold less than \$10,000 worth of agricultural products in 1998
- U.S. farms tended to be specialized in production, rather than diversified, with over half of farms producing just one commodity, most often beef cattle or field crops
- Women operate a growing share of farms, most commonly small farms, rising from 5 percent of farmers in 1978 to 9 percent in 1997, though data collection procedures probably undercount women
- Large and very large family farms received a disproportionate share of government payments