

New customers on the farm

These days, one in five Dutch farms combines agriculture with a care function, a campsite or a shop. But you need entrepreneurial flair to earn a decent living this way. 'You need to be permanently offering a quality product, have good communication skills, a strategic vision and to be good at organizing.'

TEXT MARION DE BOO PHOTO HOLLANDSE HOOGTE INFOGRAPHIC STEFFIE PADMOS





A cockerel crows in the farmyard, which smells of cows. In the high-ceilinged, spacious barn, a flock of sparrows skims past while a bantam cock pecks at grains. Cattle with curly coats and curved horns stand, contentedly chewing on their hay and maize. ‘These are Italian Marchigiana beef cattle,’ says Tineke van den Berg from city farm De Stadsboerderij in Almere. ‘In the summer they’re kept outside in the Hulkensteine wood. We chose this breed because they are friendly, healthy animals that never have problems calving. On top of that, the meat has a low cholesterol level.’ The city farm combines arable farming, market gardening, livestock farming and a public function. People from the surrounding modern housing estates can come here to learn about organic farming. Tineke van den Berg and her husband Tom Saat have been putting on educational programmes for schoolchildren, students and others for 20 years now, for example about healthy eating and the role of farms in the food cycle. They have cooking classes ranging from ‘cooking in student digs’ to Indian vegetarian food, a butcher’s shop and a farmer’s market on Saturday mornings (‘Everything that’s good for you. The food here tastes so intense!’). The barn that contains the farm machinery is sometimes used for theatrical or musical performances. The city farmers also generate electricity through solar panels and a geothermal heat pump.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

‘Our mixed farm certainly earns us enough to live off,’ says Van den Berg. ‘We do the activities for the general public as well because we are socially engaged. When we came here in 1996, we saw a big divide between farmers and consumers. The people of Almere were focused on Amsterdam and knew nothing about the farmers in the Flevopolder, who in turn ignored Almere. We saw a challenge there. City dwellers basically have no idea what goes on in livestock farming. If the cows are indoors, they ask why they are not roaming outdoors. And if the animals are kept outside, people start getting worried that they will be sent off to slaughter. City types are also always feeling sorry for the animals – even though they are not usually vegetarians themselves.’ This city farm is not unusual in modern-day agriculture and horticulture. According to Andries Visser, senior

researcher on urban-rural relations at Wageningen UR in Lelystad, there has been rapid growth in the multifunctional agriculture sector, in which farmers combine agricultural production with services to the community. ‘One in five farmers starts up additional activities and looks for new markets,’ says Visser. ‘They start a farm shop or campsite, establish a rural kindergarden or go into the care sector for former drug addicts or elderly people with dementia, for instance.’ Visser says that the sector is becoming increasingly professional. ‘The number of businesses is increasing and the products and services they offer are continuously improving too. The farming itself remains a fully-fledged business activity. Using that as the basis, a farmer can then make money from things like healthy regional products, and space, peace and quiet.’

Visser spent the past three years as the programme manager of a major public-private partnership project between Wageningen UR and the Dutch Federation of Agriculture and Horticulture (LTO), aimed at encouraging multifunctional agriculture. About 60 reports and brochures were produced with the aim of giving multifunctional farmers practical tips and inspiration (see box).

END TO EXPONENTIAL GROWTH

In 2013, multifunctional farms achieved a combined turnover of 491 million euros from agricultural production plus secondary activities. The sector grew by 60 percent between 2007 and 2013. The turnover in multifunctional agriculture even grew between 2011 and 2013, despite the economic crisis. Farm shops saw sales rise by 20 percent during this period while kindergartens actually recorded a 30 percent increase.

‘But the days of exponential growth are over,’ says programme manager Visser. ‘Businesses combining farming and care functions or kindergartens in particular are still focused on expanding the scale of activities and becoming more professional. However, grants for agricultural nature management have been restricted and are now only available for farmers in designated core areas. The farm recreation sector and other branches have more or less stabilized. That is quite an achievement now that we are seeing a decline in the number of farmers in traditional agriculture.’

Even so, the researchers still see huge potential for multifunctional farms. They can develop their own markets to a far greater extent than in traditional agriculture. Visser: ‘As a business owner, you need to be proactive and seek out new target groups. Know your customer: what do my customers want and how can I key into that? For example, in the recreation sector we are seeing a trend towards increasingly luxurious accommodation. A creative business person could enrich the tourist expe-

‘We care here for plants,
animals and people’



There is plenty of useful work to be done on a care farm, such as harvesting potatoes, feeding cows and cleaning eggs.

rience. You could have a Van Gogh farm, where you can harvest potatoes and have photos taken of yourself dressed like the *Potato Eaters*. And then go outside to paint your own picture of the Dutch skies. You can come up with more ideas than just the standard farmer's-lunch-with-buttermilk approach.'

CROWDFUNDING

In the public-private partnership project, the researchers studied the different entrepreneurial styles. Some multi-functional farmers have six or seven activities on the go in addition to the farm itself while others specialize in a single activity. Their motivations range from a rational choice to more idealistic reasons. Some make big investments based on a clear vision for the future while others work very hard and earn little. Customer engagement also varies considerably; some come along just occasionally to buy a bit of cheese while others almost feel they co-run the business.

Crowdfunding, for example for a new flock of sheep or free-range pig barn, is on the rise and an interesting option — if only because it is a way for the farmer to attract a group of loyal, long-term customers. About 1450 farms have their own shops, often on the farm. Some farmers who make their own cheese jointly rent a small shop with paid staff in a local town, and then use this to attract new urban customers to their own farm with its farm shop or other activities for the general public. The researchers have calculated that it is all right for a self-produced regional product to be up to eight percent more expensive than standard products as long as the quality is right and there is a decent story attached. 'You need a good idea of your core values and how to get that message across,' says Visser.

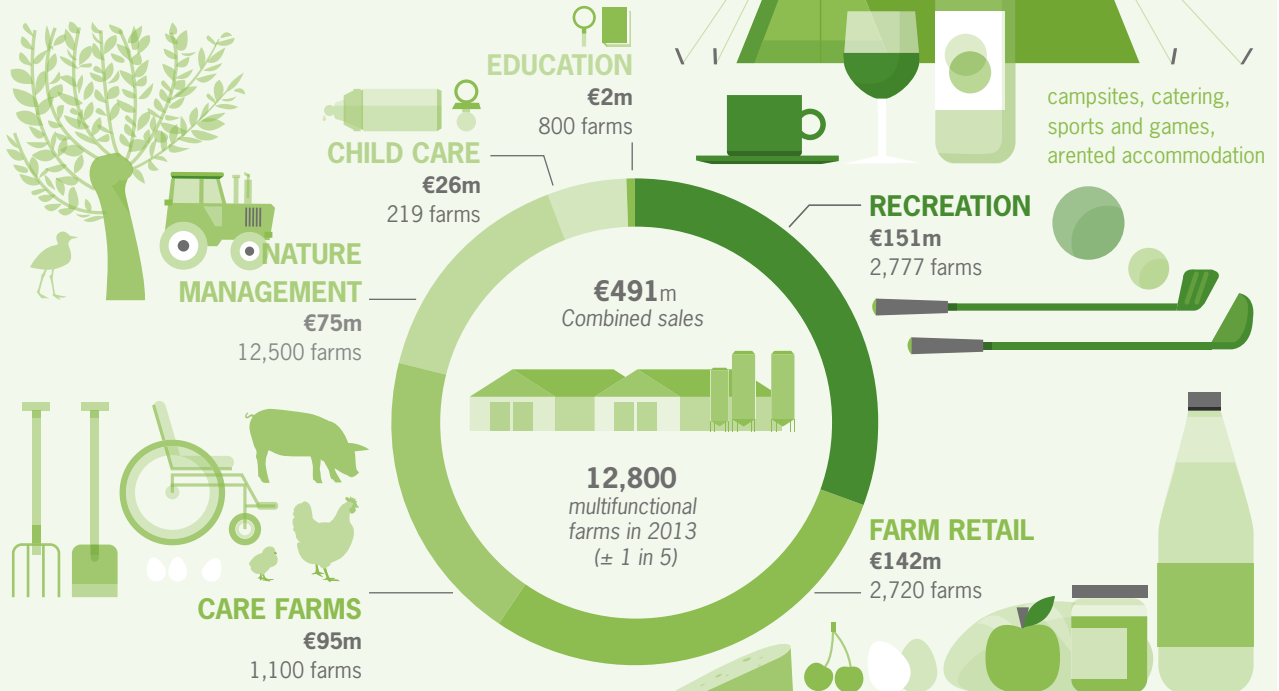
Care farms are also found in all shapes and sizes. The simplest form is when a farmer rents out space to a therapist, for example a physiotherapist who uses docile horses and ponies to improve the motor skills and posture of children with motor problems. Some care farmers are trained psychologists or psychiatrists themselves and offer therapy on the farm. Then there are farmers who hire an entire network of speech therapists, physiotherapists and remedial teachers. 'There are definitely opportunities, including financial ones,' says Visser. 'But it does need to be something that suits the farmer, his private circumstances and his farm.'

FEELING USEFUL

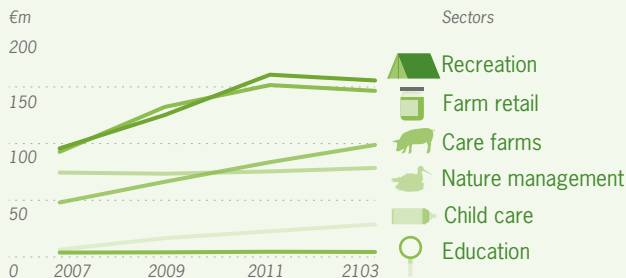
IJsbrand and Caroline Snoeij, who run the organic farm 't Paradijs in Barneveld, employ 20 staff, the equivalent of 12 full-time jobs, plus a group of volunteers. 'We have been running our care farm for ten years now,' says IJsbrand, while a red-coated cow moos gently >

MULTIFUNCTIONAL AGRICULTURE IN THE NETHERLANDS

Turnover per business activity within multifunctional agriculture



Turnover per year



Recreation turnover up, farm retail down

The number of farms offering recreation fell by about 4% between 2011 and 2013, mainly due to a decline in the number of farms. Turnover fell too as a result, an effect augmented by the economic crisis and strong competition.

The fall in turnover in farm retail statistics between 2011 and 2013 is due to the fact that the (growing) sales via third-party websites are no longer included. The turnover from farm shops themselves rose too, from 89 to 118 million euros.

in the background. 'A farm is far less off-putting than a care institution. People like coming here. They love seeing the animals and we have fantastic surroundings. What is more, there is always lots of work for them. Looking after the animals, growing the vegetables and fruit, cleaning the eggs, helping out in the shop where they can sell the products they produced themselves. People get a lot of satisfaction from the fact that they can actually do something useful rather than just being kept busy.'

Wageningen UR worked with pioneers in the field to determine the added value from care farms. 'The study gave a good picture of the core values and the beneficial effects of care farming,' said Snoeij. That includes the

skills children learn on the farm. 'A solitary child will learn how to cooperate with others on the farm,' says Snoeij. 'You need one another. You learn how to look after the animals, who to approach if something's wrong with an animal and how to solve that problem. What's more, animals reflect your behaviour. If a child rides a horse and takes hold of the reins, they feel literally in control of their own life. If you pull to the left, the horse will go left. Here you learn that you need to sow seeds before you can harvest the produce, a good metaphor for life. The elderly also flourish here, while their caregivers get a break at home.'

The Wageningen researchers compiled an overview of

what you have to do to be able to offer a professional, certified, safe learning environment. Snoeij: 'You have to satisfy a variety of quality requirements, the work has to be safe and it must be well organized. You have to hire professionals who know about things like dementia and autism. But all that knowledge should not stand in the way of day-to-day practice. After all, the great thing about a farm is its real-life feel. People can sometimes benefit a lot from ordinary people and ordinary things. And farmers are caring people by nature. We care here for plants, animals and people.'

PROFESSIONALIZATION

Harold van der Meulen from LEI Wageningen UR conducted a study last year of key economic indicators in care farming. 'We see a steady increase in professionalism. Of course some entrepreneurs drop out at the lower end but we are also getting large businesses with numerous professional employees. You see a lot of variety. Sometimes one of the children in the family business will continue the farming side while other family members focus on the care activities, for instance. In other cases, they cut back on the farming activities and intensify the other activities.'

Van der Meulen thinks it is important that Wageningen UR's project has given multifunctional farmers practical tools for taking a more critical look at their commercial results and sparring with colleagues about the figures. In addition to the type of businessperson, the location and business category are the key factors determining how a farm develops. Farms close to a town or city have a huge potential market for farm shops, a care function or a kindergarten. If they are located in the middle of nowhere, the opportunities lie in marketing such selling points as space, peace and quiet. If your farm is a lot of work, you have less time for your customers. An intensive pig farm where the focus is on managing costs and where the barns are closed off has less appeal for the public. Multifunctional agriculture is not a strategy for winding down the farm – on the contrary. Visser: 'You need an awful lot of entrepreneurial flair to earn a decent living. In addition to the technical production side, you need to know your customers and the market, which is often volatile. You need to be offering a quality product at all times, have good communication skills, a strategic vision and to be good at organizing. Some large care farms have a turnover in the millions of euros and provide jobs for 20 or so employees whereas traditional arable farmers may be able to run the farm as one part-time job. Sometimes the turnover from the ancillary activities is even more than from the production side. But a healthy agricultural business remains the basis. The key thing is still: know your customer. Know your

'Know your market and imagine how a city-dweller sees things'

market. Don't rely too much on your own preferences as a farmer; imagine how a city dweller sees things. Be willing to charge the right price – you are offering city dwellers a unique product. And know yourself! You need to know both what you're good at and what you would be better not tackling.'

MUCH APPRECIATED

Tineke van den Berg from Almere for example would never opt for a recreational ancillary business with 'farmer's golf' and similar games, or for a restaurant on the farm. 'That's not my thing. But I do find education important. You can't earn a living from it but you get a lot of appreciation. I think it is important to invest in people. We can live off the abundant produce from our farm thanks to the people who are willing to buy our products. In exchange for that, we want to give the city something in return.' ■

www.wageningenur.nl/multifunctionalagriculture

MORE INFORMATION?

The PPP project 'Multifunctional Agriculture' has produced about 60 reports and brochures. They have been collated in a handy digital list of publications, which is still being added to. Publications such as *Finding and keeping guests* and *Crowdfunding on the farm* offer assistance when dealing with practical problems. The brochure *Successful cooperation in multifunctional family businesses* discusses such issues as mixing private and business matters, involvement and commitment, pitfalls and rules of thumb for communication. *The ideal farm shop* discusses customers, formulas, assortments and the shop layout. A smart business owner will make sure that customers get a positive impression as soon as they cross the threshold. Nine times out of ten, a customer will then turn to the right and examine the right-hand wall. A logical route should take them past all corners of the shop, passing special offers and with samples to taste as a way of keeping visitors in the shop for longer, as well as plenty of appealing products, preferably at eye level, before finally reaching the cash till. It should be located on the left of the entrance, from where the shopkeeper can greet new customers as they come in.

www.stadlandrelaties.nl/en/publications