

**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT POLICY/ORDINANCE  
INTERPRETATION**

Interpretation No.: AG-RES (agriculture, small scale commercial on RA and SU properties)  
Effective Date: 07/30/08  
Originally Issued: N/A

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**Question**

*What are the criteria for “small-scale commercial agriculture” in Residential Agricultural and Special Use Districts?*

**Applicable Regulatory Section(s)**

§13.10.321(a) and (b)  
§13.10.322(b)

**INTERPRETATION:**

In RA districts and SU districts with a Residential General Plan designation, small-scale commercial agriculture, including the raising of commercial crops, is allowed if it is compatible with residential uses, complies with all applicable regulations, and does not create a nuisance for neighboring properties. The types of crops that can be grown are not limited to specific “specialty crops”, but also include common crops such as lettuce, grapes and apples.

**Reason**

The County code places certain limits on small-scale commercial agricultural uses in residential districts:

- On properties designated Residential in the General Plan, small-scale commercial agriculture is allowed only on RA or SU properties (13.10.322(b)).
- Small-scale commercial agriculture is allowed only on RA and SU zoned properties with an existing residence (see policy interpretation RES-VACANT-01).
- Agricultural uses that include on-site retail sales require a Level 5 permit.
- Animal-related uses have specific limits, which are listed in Section 13.10.322(b), and in other sections of the County Code.

The County Code does not limit commercial small-scale agriculture to specific specialty crops, or regulate the amount of acreage that may be devoted to commercial agriculture. However, small scale commercial agriculture on RA and SU zoned properties must be compatible with the primary residential use of the property, adequately protect natural resources, and not create a nuisance to neighboring properties (Sections 13.10.321 (a) and (b)).

While it is important to protect residential properties from any nuisances that could potentially result from small-scale commercial agriculture, the type and intensity of commercial agricultural use that would be appropriate can vary depending on the size of the parcel, the proximity and type of adjoining land uses, and topographic and other environmental conditions of the property.

The following guidelines are designed to assist owners of RA or SU properties in developing a commercial agricultural use that is compatible with neighboring residential properties. With these guidelines in mind, the property owner can set appropriate parameters for their particular use, including the location, the appropriate distance between commercial agricultural use and neighboring properties, the maximum size of the area that should be cultivated, the appropriate use of chemicals and mechanical equipment, and other aspects of their operation.

The commercial agricultural use should protect neighboring properties from the following nuisances:

- Noise
- Odors
- Dust
- Unsightliness
- Hazards such noxious fumes, including pesticide fumes. (Application of specific pesticides is regulated by the Agricultural Commissioner).

In addition to these guidelines, commercial agricultural uses must comply with all applicable environmental regulations, including grading requirements in Chapter 16.20, land clearing requirements in Chapter 16.22, erosion protection including preventing accelerated erosion as required in Section 16.22.050, riparian corridor and wetland protection requirements specified in Chapter 16.30, and sensitive habitat protection in Chapter 16.32.

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Tom Burns, Planning Director

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