



Pick-your-own (U-Pick) Marketing

Matt Ernst¹

INTRODUCTION

Pick-your-own (PYO), or U-Pick, occurs when farmers “invite the public onto the farm to harvest their own food.”¹ Pick-your-own has existed for nearly a century as a distinct farm marketing channel in the U.S. Early forms of pick-your-own marketing, called self-harvesting, developed during labor shortages or periods of severely low prices and often functioned on an informal or as-needed basis:

Self-harvesting...is sometimes practiced in areas close to towns or cities. In periods when fruits or vegetables are at their best for harvesting, some farmers arrange to have buyers come to the farm and do their own harvesting of berries, peaches, apples and vegetables. The practice saves the farmer considerable labor, although harvesting by inexperienced persons might damage the plants. The consumers often like to do it because it saves money and gives them an outing. (USDA, 1954 Yearbook of Agriculture, p. 27-28)

Pick-your-own farm offerings include fruits and vegetables, as well as “U-Cut” flowers, Christmas trees and other ornamental crops. Pick-your-own was once the main reason for consumers to visit a farm; it is now more often one activity out of many on-farm agritourism activities. Farms have also offered activities incorporating principles of PYO, such as “cut your own bouquets” of cut flowers, on-farm classes that include harvesting and arranging herbs and ornamentals, and using products harvested on the farm to make crafts, like Christmas wreaths.

Crops that require little expertise to har-



Photo by Zen Chung, Pexels.com

vest but demand considerable harvest labor per acre are especially suited for PYO marketing in Kentucky.

These include tree fruits, berries, tomatoes, beans and pumpkins. U-Cut Christmas trees also continue, but many tree farms offer customers the option of selecting a tree that tree farm workers will then cut.



www.uky.edu/CCD

¹Matt Ernst is an independent contractor with the Center for Crop Diversification.

This publication provides an overview of PYO marketing in Kentucky: a discussion of PYO as part of the agritourism economy, key considerations for farms considering adding PYO to a marketing plan, successful PYO innovations in Kentucky and nearby states and a primer about specific farm financial management issues related to PYO.

An extension publication offering additional insights for producers considering a PYO enterprise is available from the University of Tennessee (UT) Center for Profitable Agriculture. *Pick Your Own: A Farmer's Guide to a Pick-Your-Own Operation* is available at <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1802.pdf>.

PYO IN THE AGRITOURISM ECONOMY

Agritourism is a business enterprise that combines agriculture and tourism on a working farm, ranch or other agribusiness operation. The Commonwealth of Kentucky defines agritourism in consumer terms as, “the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural, or agribusiness operations for the purpose of enjoyment, education or active involvement in the activities of the farm operation.”

Agritourism has grown in its contribution to Kentucky's agricultural economy. Kentucky farms earned more than \$17 million from agritourism and recreational sources in 2017, more than doubling the amount the Census reported five years earlier.

More than three-fourths of Kentucky farms with income from agritourism reported less than \$10,000 coming from an agritourism enterprise. For those farms, an enterprise like pick-your-own may well be a standalone enterprise, often for a single crop.

Pick-your-own is often part of a broader agritourism enterprise when included in larger agritourism operations. Farms with \$10,000 or more in agritourism income, around 150 farms across the Commonwealth, accounted for more than 90 percent of the agritourism receipts estimated in 2017.

ADDING PYO TO A FARM MARKETING PLAN

Whether pick-your-own is being considered as a standalone agritourism enterprise or as part of a farm's



Photo by Zen Chung, Pexels.com

broader agritourism marketing strategy, there are similar considerations producers make for adding pick-your-own to their farm marketing plan. This section looks at four of the most common considerations:

- Location and welcoming customers to the farm
- Customer safety and managing farm risk
- Labor and pricing
- Promotion and social media platforms

Prospective PYO producers will identify other areas of importance to adding a PYO enterprise to their farm marketing plan. Resources for further reading and study are listed at the end of this section.

LOCATION AND WELCOMING CUSTOMERS TO THE FARM

A well-worn saying about retail marketing is that the three most important things are “location, location and location.” Location is one of the key considerations for farms considering PYO marketing.

It is helpful to first think about how close the farm location is to its potential customers. Successful PYO operations are usually located close enough to a large enough population interested in coming onto the farm to harvest a crop. This means that there probably will not be other nearby farms offering the same PYO experience for the same crop; or, if there are, there is a great enough population to supply enough visitors to all farms.

Helpful worksheets have been developed by North

Carolina State Extension and UT Extension for defining an agritourism enterprise and evaluating the local market. Worksheets may be accessed in **Agritourism in Focus: A Guide for Tennessee Farmers** (Chapter 4, Marketing) at https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1754_ch4.pdf.

A farm near a well-traveled road may have an advantage in offering pick-your-own and other agritourism enterprises. However, a great location does not guarantee a PYO operation's success; similarly, a farm not located near a major byway can still consider PYO as a marketing option. Some successful PYO marketers have turned their remote location into an asset by emphasizing their high-quality products and experience, or the retreat into the country that customers get when coming to pick their own produce. Successful remote PYO operations usually offer products that consumers cannot find anywhere else, exceptional service, and more purchase options than just a single crop. These farms turn themselves into "destinations" for consumers that may not normally go out of their way to purchase food.

The way to your farm, no matter where it's located, should be well-marked from all directions with adequate signage. For a summary of colors and kinds of signs that work best, refer to University of Kentucky Extension publication ID-106, [Promotion and Advertising for Kentucky's Direct Markets](#).

No matter where the PYO farm is located, it is essential that customers can park and move about the farm with ease. A farm welcoming agritourism visitors must establish clearly marked parking areas, including clearly marked handicapped parking spaces. Clearly marked pathways that are not easily muddied by rain help visitors move comfortably and safely about the farm. There must be adequate parking and amenities, such as access to restrooms and drinking water. In addition, customers may want places to "cool off" after they are done picking.

Zoning regulations should also be included when con-

sidering location. Local zoning ordinances could affect the farm's ability to add an agritourism venture, such as pick-your-own. It is wise to verify with local zoning authorities that the location may be used for a pick-your-own enterprise or other agritourism purposes.

A 2019 publication from the University of Vermont contains a good list of questions to ask about farm location and layout:

How to Develop a Pick-Your-Own Business

<https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Vermont-Agritourism-Collaborative/2019HowTo-DevelopPYO.pdf>



Pixabay.com photo

CUSTOMER SAFETY AND MANAGING FARM RISK

Welcoming customers to the PYO farm is not only good business; it also helps keep farm visitors safe. Customer safety is a vital part of managing farm risk, and this section outlines some common issues when considering a PYO enterprise. Like the rest of this fact sheet, this section is not intended as legal advice, nor should it replace visiting with qualified insurance, legal and business management professionals about the best risk management strategy for any given farm.

Identify places that may be dangerous or unfamiliar to farm visitors

Many parts of a farm can present hazards or questions for visitors, such as machinery and equipment, ponds, animals and work projects in progress. It may be important to inform visitors of potential risks and restrict visitors from potentially dangerous areas with fences or other barriers.

Some everyday farm activities could appear unusual to people with non-farm backgrounds. Taking opportunities to explain farm activities through signage, literature, or other educational materials can go a long way toward answering questions. Finally, remember: nothing helps customer relations more than friendly, personal answers to questions.

Purchase appropriate liability insurance

No matter how well-planned and prepared a farm safety plan is, the possibility for accidents will remain. Farm liability insurance can help an agritourism operator manage exposure to possible financial risks from accidents and may help maintain peace of mind in the event of unexpected occurrences.

Liability insurance requirements vary from farm to farm. A good first step for a farm considering a PYO enterprise is to visit with a qualified insurance professional. Farms with existing liability coverage may be able to make a call directly to their local agent to begin this discussion; new farmers considering PYO may need to “shop around” for an appropriate insurance provider as not all providers will be familiar with this kind of operation.

There are obvious potential advantages to working with an insurance professional with prior experience insuring farms engaging in PYO or other agritourism enterprises. Producers can benefit from an on-farm visit with the insurance agent, where the agent can see where and how the PYO operation will run. The insurance agent will likely be able to help you identify potential “danger zones” on your farm operation.

Another aspect of managing farm risks involves what visitors may bring with them onto the farm – and how visitors may impact farm product quality. Visitors could unwittingly bring unwelcome animal diseases or plant pathogens onto the farm. More commonly, customers harvesting a crop can cause damage to fruit that is not yet ripe. Plant disease pathogens and pests could also be transmitted by visitors. This kind of risk to your products is even more important to consider when you produce products for other market channels besides PYO as disease or damage could also affect that revenue stream.

The following resources are available for producers interested in learning more about agritourism liability issues and insurance:

Agritourism Liability (Rutgers University training module)

<http://agritourism.rutgers.edu/pdfs/Module%20-%20Liability.pdf>



UK CSA Photo

Agritourism Best Management Practices and Plan of Operation (LSU)

https://www.lsuagcenter.com/topics/community/community_dev/agritourism/publications/best-managment_practices/agritourism-best-management-practices-and-plan-of-operation

Safety, Liability and Regulations (Vermont Agritourism Collaborative)

<https://www.uvm.edu/extension/vtagritourism/safety-liability-and-regulations>

Top 10 Ways to Limit Your Liability (Kerr Center/Vermont Agritourism Collaborative)

<https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Vermont-Agritourism-Collaborative/top-10-ways-to-limit-your-liability.pdf>

LABOR AND PRICING

There should be a compelling, profitable business case for starting a PYO enterprise or adding PYO as part of an existing agritourism enterprise. This section addresses pricing, labor and other important economic considerations for pick-your-own.

Successful Pick-your-own Innovations in Kentucky

A few Kentucky Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, including the University of Kentucky's CSA at the UK Horticulture Research Farm, have a joint CSA plus selected U-Pick items in season that have been successful. Clear signage, instructions and orientation training for customers help in the UK CSA program. Each year the UK CSA grows a few crops specifically for U-Pick. Some of these crops are also available in CSA shares (examples are green beans and basil), while others are only being grown for U-Pick (examples include flowers, okra and cherry tomatoes). Not all members participate in U-Pick, but motivated members can supplement their shares with things that they would like more of, or that they might not receive otherwise.

Every week that U-Pick is available, the UK CSA lists what is available (and the amounts each shareholder is allowed) in the weekly newsletter. Anyone coming to the farm to U-Pick for the first time is asked to participate in a U-Pick orientation training.

Customers doing U-Pick need to bring their own harvest containers, and their own pruners or scissors if they are interested in okra or flowers. All U-Pick crops will also be marked in the field with a "you-pick" sign. The UK CSA offers maps on its website showing the locations of U-Pick fields.

The UK CSA also offers U-Pick raspberries and blackberries, as well as a perennial U-Pick field with additional herbs and flowers. Customers may take only cuttings, not whole plants.

During 2020 and 2021, the UK CSA required U-Pick



Photo by Annie Koempel

U-Pick blackberries with plants trained on a rotating cross-arm trellis system at Eckert's Orchard in Kentucky.

customers to follow COVID-19 protocols. These included washing hands or using hand sanitizer before harvesting; cleaning and sanitizing their own harvesting tools; and using social distancing and wearing masks when other people were in the field.

For details on the UK CSA U-Pick options, visit <https://ukcsa.wordpress.com/member-information/you-pick/>.

Eckert's Orchard in Versailles, Kentucky offers U-Pick blackberries with plants trained on a rotating cross-arm trellis system to make picking easy and fun for

their customers.



UK CSA Photo

Farm marketers frequently face challenges when setting prices for marketing farm products directly to consumers. For PYO products, these challenges include not undervaluing the labor that is needed to produce and market the crop and identifying how much a

consumer is willing to pay.

There can be harvest labor savings when using PYO marketing; indeed, reducing the need for sourcing and paying harvest labor is a reason many producers in the

past adopted PYO. However, PYO does not eliminate all harvest labor needs. Someone must be available to welcome, oversee and charge customers. These duties can include weighing or counting the produce that has been picked, collecting payment, answering farm-related questions, and providing directions to restrooms and other on-farm amenities. Strong public relations skills and the ability to communicate effectively are critical for this role.

Harvest labor may also be needed to “pick over” crops that have been harvested by PYO customers. There is also the value of the owner or manager’s time that is spent communicating with potential customers about the crop. Farm operators frequently undervalue the amount of time spent on these tasks – or may not assign any value to the time spent marketing.

For some farm operators, labor time required for PYO may be better spent on managing other aspects of their farm or crop. Some producers report that PYO marketing does not return enough profits to justify it; their time is better spent harvesting the crop and retailing it elsewhere.

Spending time developing a cost of production estimate, using university crop budgets or other budget tools, can help the producer analyze whether PYO could enhance farm profitability. Many growers find that the most profitable marketing plan for their farm uses several different market channels; but an owner’s preferences, and his or her ease in dealing with the public, may influence the choice of PYO marketing.

Developing a cost of production estimate is also essential to determining what price to charge PYO customers. Assigning a cost to each crop production operation needed – including the time needed to harvest the crop – helps the producer have a “real number” for cost of production. This is a way to make sure that the price charged is not too low.

Another sound pricing strategy when considering a PYO crop is finding out what the target customers are willing to pay to come to the farm and pick their own produce. A producer selling at a farmers market, for example, could conduct a formal or informal survey of customers to see if they were interested in PYO. Similar surveys could be completed using online surveys or simple social media interactions. The best measure

of demand – how much a customer is willing to pay for a certain good – is to ask potential customers how much they are willing to pay.

SELECTED RESOURCES

The resources listed below may be helpful in addressing pricing, labor and other economic considerations for PYO operations.

University of Kentucky Center for Crop Diversification Budgets

<https://www.uky.edu/ccd/tools/budgets>

A General Guide to Pricing for Direct Farm Marketers and Value-Added Agricultural Entrepreneurs (University of Tennessee)

https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_agexmkt/30/

SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER PROMOTIONS AND ADVERTISING

The internet has impacted marketing strategies for all sizes of businesses, including farm businesses. Developing a social media strategy to communicate with established customers, and reach potential new customers, has become vital to many agritourism entrepreneurs.

A key to building a social media strategy is identifying the social media channel, or channels, that the target customers are most likely to use. Farms that already have an established Facebook page, for example, may have already identified a probable pool of PYO customers. Other social media and internet outlets commonly used are Twitter, Instagram and the direct email list.

Fortunately, there are a variety of educational tools to help farm marketers navigate the world of social media. The resources listed below are good places to begin.

Buying Advertising: Guidance to Specialty Crop Growers Direct Marketing to Consumers (UT Extension)

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1824.pdf>

How to Handle Complaints and Poor Reviews on Social Media: Direct Marketing Tips for Specialty Crop Growers (UT Extension)

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/D13.pdf>

How to Choose What Social Media Sites to Use (Penn State Extension)

<https://extension.psu.edu/how-to-choose-which-social-media-sites-to-use>

Developing a Social Media Strategy (Penn State Extension)

<https://extension.psu.edu/developing-a-social-media-strategy>

OTHER RESOURCES

- Pick Your Own: A Farmers Guide to a Pick-Your-Own Operation (University of Tennessee, 2014) <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/pb1802.pdf>
- Agritourism (University of Kentucky, 2011) http://www.uky.edu/ccd/sites/www.uky.edu/ccd/files/agritourism_0.pdf
- Direct Marketing (ATTRA, 2016) <https://attra.ncat.org/product/direct-marketing/>
- Direct Marketing Guide for Producers of Fruits, Vegetables, and Other Specialty Products (University of Tennessee, 2002) <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1711.pdf>
- National Agricultural Law Center (University of Arkansas) <http://nationalaglawcenter.org/research-by-topic/>

- Pick-Your-Own Operations and Farm Stands — Options for Your Business (University of Wisconsin, 2006) <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/A3811-14.pdf>
- A How-To Guide for a Successful Agritourism Enterprise (University of Georgia) <https://www.caes.uga.edu/content/caes-subsite/caed/toolbox/agritourism.html>
- Agritourism (Cornell Cooperative Extension, 2020) <http://tioga.cce.cornell.edu/for-farmers/agritourism>
- Agritourism (University of Maryland Extension, 2021) <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/agritourism>

¹Neil D. Hamilton. The Legal Guide for Direct Farm Marketing (Drake University Law School, 1999) p. 26.

Suggested Citation:

Ernst, M. (2021). *Pick-your-own (U-Pick) Marketing*. CCD-MP-3. Lexington, KY: Center for Crop Diversification, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment. Available: <https://www.uky.edu/ccd/sites/www.uky.edu/ccd/files/pyo.pdf>

Reviewed by Brett Wolff, UK Extension Specialist, and Savannah Columbia, UK Extension Associate

Photos courtesy of Zen Chung, [Pexels.com](https://pexels.com) (Pgs. 1 & 2); [Pixabay.com](https://pixabay.com) (Page 3); UK CSA (Page 3 and U-Pick sunflowers, Page 4), and Annie Koempel (U-Pick blackberries, Page 4).

November 2021

For additional information, contact your local [County Extension](#) agent

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability.