

Pick-your-own (U-pick) Marketing

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Overview

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

Pick-your-own offerings include fruits and vegetables, as well as U-Cut flowers, Christmas trees, and other ornamental crops. While PYO was once the main reason consumers visited a farm, it is now often one part of a broader agritourism experience. Farms have also adapted PYO principles into activities such as cut-your-own bouquets, on-farm classes involving harvest and arranging herbs or ornamentals, and craft-making using farm-harvested materials.



Crops that require little expertise to harvest but substantial harvest labor per acre are especially well suited for PYO marketing in Kentucky. These include tree fruits, berries, tomatoes, beans, and pumpkins. U-Cut Christmas trees remain part of this tradition, although many farms now allow customers to select a tree that farm staff then cut.

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

PYO in the Agritourism Economy

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

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 reported five years earlier. More than three-fourths of Kentucky farms with agritourism income reported earning less than \$10,000 from such enterprises. For those farms, a PYO enterprise may function as a standalone enterprise, often focused on a single crop.

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

Adding PYO to a Farm Marketing Plan

Whether PYO is being considered as a standalone agritourism enterprise or as part of a broader farm marketing strategy, producers often weigh similar considerations. The publication identifies four of the most common: location and welcoming customers to the farm, customer safety and managing farm risk, labor and pricing, and promotion and social media platforms.

Location and Welcoming Customers to the Farm

Location is one of the key considerations for farms considering PYO marketing. Producers should think first about how close the farm 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 also means either there are not many nearby farms offering the same PYO experience for the same crop, or the surrounding population is large enough to support multiple farms.



A farm near a well-traveled road may have an advantage, but a good location alone does not guarantee success. Likewise, a farm in a more remote location can still succeed with PYO if it emphasizes product quality, customer experience, or the value of a rural outing. Remote operations often succeed when they offer products customers cannot easily find elsewhere, exceptional service, and more purchase options than a single crop. These farms become destinations.

The route to the farm should be clearly marked from all directions with adequate signage. Once visitors arrive, the farm should provide clearly marked parking, including accessible parking spaces, and pathways that allow customers to move comfortably and safely around the farm. Producers should also think about amenities such as restrooms, drinking water, and places where customers can cool off after picking.

Zoning regulations should also be considered. Local zoning ordinances may affect whether the farm can add a PYO or other agritourism enterprise, so it is wise to verify these issues with local zoning authorities in advance.

Customer Safety and Managing Farm Risk

Welcoming customers to the farm is not only good business; it is also an important part of risk management. Producers should identify places on the farm that may be dangerous or unfamiliar to visitors, such as machinery, equipment, ponds, animals, or work areas in progress. Farms may need fences, barriers, signage, or other restrictions to keep visitors away from unsafe locations.

Many ordinary farm activities may be unfamiliar to non-farm visitors. Taking time to explain these activities through signage, printed materials, or personal interaction can reduce confusion and improve the customer experience. Friendly, direct answers to questions can go a long way in supporting both customer relations and safety.

No matter how well planned a farm safety program is, accidents remain possible. Farm liability insurance can help an agritourism operator manage exposure to financial risks and maintain peace of mind. Insurance requirements vary from farm to farm, so one of the first steps for a producer considering PYO is to talk with a qualified insurance professional. Producers with existing farm liability coverage may begin with their current agent, but some operations may need to shop for a provider with experience insuring PYO or agritourism enterprises. An on-farm visit from an insurance agent can be especially useful in identifying danger zones and evaluating the way the operation will function.

Another risk management issue involves what visitors bring with them onto the farm and how visitors may affect crop quality. Customers may unintentionally bring animal diseases or plant pathogens onto the farm. More commonly, they may damage unripe fruit or contribute to pest and disease spread. This is especially important when a farm also produces for other market channels, because crop damage or disease can affect additional revenue streams.

Labor and Pricing

There should be a compelling and profitable business case for starting a PYO enterprise or adding PYO to an existing agritourism business. Farm marketers often face challenges in setting prices for direct-to-consumer products, and PYO adds its own

complications. Producers must avoid undervaluing the labor needed to produce and market the crop while also understanding what customers are willing to pay.

There can be harvest labor savings with PYO marketing, and reducing the need to source and pay harvest labor is one reason some producers have adopted the model. However, PYO does not eliminate labor needs. Someone must be available to welcome, oversee, and charge customers. These duties may include weighing or counting produce, collecting payment, answering farm-related questions, and directing customers to restrooms or other amenities. Strong public relations skills and effective communication are critical in this role.



Additional labor may be needed to pick over crops after customers have harvested. Producers also frequently undervalue the time spent answering customer questions, communicating with potential visitors, and managing the marketing side of the enterprise. For some producers, the labor required for PYO may be better spent harvesting the crop themselves and retailing it elsewhere. Some operators report that PYO does not return enough profit to justify the additional time and management demands.

Developing a cost of production estimate is an important step in determining whether PYO can improve farm profitability. Assigning a cost to each crop production operation, including the time required for harvest and customer management, helps ensure that the farm does not set prices too low. Another sound pricing strategy is to find out what target customers are willing to pay to come to the farm and pick their own produce.

Producers can survey existing customers at farmers markets, online, or through social media to assess interest and price tolerance. The best measure of demand is often simply asking potential customers how much they are willing to pay.

Promotion and Social Media Platforms

Promotion is an important part of any PYO enterprise, and social media has become a key tool for reaching both existing and potential customers. A good social media strategy starts by identifying which platforms target customers are most likely to use. Farms that already maintain a Facebook page, for example, may already have identified a probable pool of PYO customers. Other commonly used outlets include Twitter, Instagram, and direct email lists.

The publication notes that there are many educational tools available to help farm marketers navigate social media effectively. These can be especially useful for farms that are new to direct-to-consumer promotion or trying to build more consistent customer engagement.

Successful Pick-your-own Innovations in Kentucky

The publication highlights successful Kentucky examples of U-Pick innovation. A few Kentucky Community Supported Agriculture farms, including the University of Kentucky CSA at the UK Horticulture Research Farm, have successfully combined CSA with selected in-season U-Pick items. Clear signage, instructions, and orientation training help the UK CSA program operate effectively. Each year, the UK CSA grows some crops specifically for U-Pick. Some of these are also available in shares, such as green beans and basil, while others are grown only for U-Pick, such as flowers, okra, and cherry tomatoes.

Each week that U-Pick is available, the UK CSA lists what is available and how much each shareholder may harvest in the weekly newsletter. Anyone coming for the first time is asked to participate in an orientation. Customers must bring their own containers and, for some crops, their own pruners or scissors. U-Pick crops are marked in the field with signs, and the CSA provides maps showing field locations. The UK CSA also offers U-Pick raspberries and blackberries, along with 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 customers to follow COVID-19 protocols including

handwashing or sanitizer use, sanitizing tools, social distancing, and masks when other people were present in the field.



The publication also notes that Eckert's Orchard in Versailles, Kentucky offers U-Pick blackberries using a rotating cross-arm trellis system that helps make picking easier and more enjoyable for customers.

Selected Resources

Location, Agritourism Planning, and Liability

- *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 in Focus: A Guide for Tennessee Farmers* (University of Tennessee, Chapter 4, Marketing)
https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1754_ch4.pdf
- *How to Develop a Pick-Your-Own Business* (University of Vermont, 2019)
<https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Vermont-Agritourism-Collaborative/2019HowTo-DevelopPYO.pdf>
- *Agritourism Liability* (Rutgers University training module)
<http://agritourism.rutgers.edu/pdfs/Module%205%20-%20Liability.pdf>
- *Agritourism Best Management Practices and Plan of Operation* (LSU)
https://www.lsuagcenter.com/topics/community/community_dev/agritourism/publications/best_management_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>

Pricing, Labor, and Promotion

- 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/
- *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

- *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>

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