



RISK REDUCTION OPTIONS FOR PICK-YOUR-OWN FARMS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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What are some key risks?

- *Customers interacting with one another* without sufficient physical distancing.
- *Customers interacting with employees* in the field or at points of sale.
- *Customer contact with high-touch surfaces* and possibly plants or unpicked edible crops.
- *Employees handling money* during sales.
- *Reduced sales and/or increased costs* as a result of new practices adopted.
- *Increased stress* for farm owners and employees related to health, economics, or new procedures.

What are some key decisions?

- *Whether to offer PYO* or switch to other market(s).
- *Whether to reduce PYO offerings*: area of fields / timing of availability / crops or cultivars.
- *How to manage customer flow*: scheduling, access/location, duration of visits.
- *What additional cleaning and sanitizing protocols to adopt*, and how to assure implementation.
- *How to manage no-contact payments*: electronic payment (Venmo or Cashapp for example), on-line or phone credit card/PayPal, exact change check or cash box.



PYO strawberry field



PYO beds of herbs

The best ways to maximize physical distancing during PYO is to limit the number, frequency, and proximity of people on the farm. Therefore, farms should weigh the pros and cons of PYO and strongly consider alternative markets for their crops when possible. A poorly planned PYO could result in the exposure of you, your staff and your customers. Consider whether it is worth the risk and if you have a back-up plan if you or your workers were to get sick. If you decide to go ahead with PYO, your operations must be modified in ways that maximize social distancing.

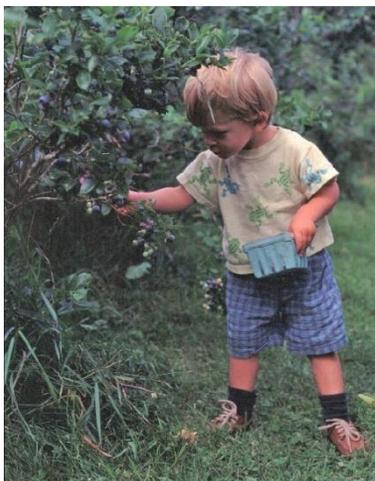
Some options for managing risks:

Do not offer PYO this season. If you have sufficient staff, market potential and management capacity, consider alternatives that typically require less in-person contact. These include wholesaling, on-line retailing with curbside pick-up, or a pre-picked CSA model with scheduled, physically distanced pick up. Consider any extra PYO costs likely to be incurred without switching, as well as new harvesting and marketing costs when analyzing this option. If you make this change, how might it affect future PYO sales, if at all?

Reduce PYO offerings. You may want to shift some, but not all, of your market from PYO to other outlets. A smaller PYO area and/or shorter picking season could facilitate control of customer behavior, and reduce potential interaction with employees required to manage PYO. Less supply for your PYO, and thus greater demand, could allow you to increase your PYO prices, too. Some method of pre-scheduling may be needed to minimize customer disappointment due to reduced PYO availability.

Limit the number of customers in fields. The availability of harvestable crop, the desire to get outdoors onto a farm, and of course, weather condition, are just a few factors that will affect how many people might wish to visit your PYO at any one time. How much area per person do you need to aim for to assure adequate physical distancing, given that people are moving about while picking? One acre can accommodate about 1,200 people with their own 6'x6' area. If ten times that area is needed to maintain at least 6' separation while harvesting, then a cap of 120 people per acre at any one time is required. A lower cap (more space per person) may make sense, especially if children are present. Since children pose a unique risk for movement, consider asking customers to leave them at home.

Is adequate physical separation likely to be maintained simply by request, particularly on busy picking days? If not, some options are: 1) limit access to fields and require people to wait in their cars or a designated area until allowed to enter fields, 2) create an on-line scheduling system for blocks of picking time (perhaps with some pre-paid quantity of fruit included) to keep a cap on customers present at one time, 3) set up well-marked (perhaps color-coded) areas and assign them to customers to promote separation, 4) pay staff to supervise customers and 'help' them comply with picking rules.



Consider children in your policies



Handwashing and toilet facilities are "high touch"

Manage customer behavior on the farm. Inform customers that physical distancing and sanitation practices are required for participation in PYO. Lay out “one-way” flow for customer traffic through the fields. Ask all customers to wear facemasks, following CDC guidance. Consider providing facemasks (washable or disposable) for customers. Ask that any edible crop touched be harvested or discarded on the ground (if not suitable for harvest). Do not allow eating while picking, to avoid removal of masks and to limit hand-to-face contact. If appropriate, set a time limit for picking, or ask customers to leave when done picking in order to allow people that may be waiting to access the field. Provide new harvest containers in a manner that prevents customer contact with containers they will not use. If providing re-usable harvest containers, explain collection point locations to customers, and sanitize after each customer use.

Minimize staff interaction with customers. Sell by the unit, not by weight. Provide customers with new, disposable harvest containers. Provide separate bathroom for customers. Establish schedules or separate picking areas so your crew does not harvest near customers. Close off the non-PYO area of the farm to customers. Train staff on best practices for assisting customers with harvest supplies, maintaining hand washing and toilet facilities, “enforcing” picking instructions, and taking payments, as applicable. Create SOPs for these practices and post them for employees to review as needed. All employees should wear gloves and face masks/coverings, per current State guidance.

Institute rigorous cleaning and sanitizing procedures. Require customers to wash or sanitize hands before and after picking, and to wear masks when on farm premises. Provide easy access to hand-washing and hand sanitizer stations. Frequently clean and/or sanitize high touch surfaces such as: handles, keyboards, countertops, hand-wash stations and portable toilet facilities. Provide logs for employees to document completion of cleaning practices. For customers, post signage, web instructions and supplement with ongoing verbal instruction. Sanitize all scissors, etc. after use, or do not provide them and ask customers bring their own.

Don’t handle cash or checks. If you must, either use an exact-change cash box, or have employees wear disposable gloves and know how to use them properly. Best to use credit card systems at the farm or set up on-line, pre-pay systems. Consider ‘membership’ plans with up-front payments that are drawn down over the season as a way to increase sales and limit interaction to fewer, more dedicated customers.

Communicate clearly. Use all of your communication channels to let customers know what PYO practices you are changing, and why. Emphasize the goal is safety for your customers, employees, and family. If you have policies that must be followed, be clear about your expectations for customer behavior. Thank your customers for their patience and understanding, and remind them of the health benefits of getting outdoors and eating fresh local produce!

Stay apprised of government requirements and recommendations, which may be frequently updated. State of Vermont resources and guidance can be found at www.accd.vermont.gov/covid-19

Additional guidance on preventative procedures for PYO farms can be found at:

University of Florida Extension. [U-Pick Farms: Steps for Farm Managers](#)

North Carolina State University. [Covid-19 FAQ for U-Pick Farms](#)

South Carolina Dept. of Agriculture. [Guidelines for UPick Farms During the Covid-19 Outbreak](#)