

Develop a Pick-Your-Own Business

AGRITOURISM BEST PRACTICES SERIES



(Lynn Ketchum, Oregon State University Extension)

A pick-your-own (PYO or U-pick) operation is a direct marketing channel where customers harvest fruits, vegetables, flowers, or trees on their own. Like any marketing channel, a PYO has advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, it offers customers fun, memorable experiences that often become seasonal family traditions for many looking for wholesome, outdoor recreation. For farmers who spend the majority of their time on their property, bringing in customers is a nice way to meet neighbors and community. On the other hand, bringing visitors to your fields opens you up to many risks. This guide will examine the pick-your-own model and help you determine whether it's suitable for your farm.

Advantages/Disadvantages of PYO

Advantages

- Reduced labor for harvesting
- Opportunity to sell additional products when customers come to your farm
- Your farm can become a community gathering space
- Opportunity to get to know your customers
- Opportunity to educate customers about produce varieties and growing methods
- Elimination of some post-harvest handling tasks (sorting, storage, packing, shipping)
- Reduced packaging costs when customers bring their own
- No need for distributors
- Cash in hand
- Greater market recognition

Disadvantages

- Risk exposure (food safety and accidents)
- Long hours
- Advertising costs may change in order to get customers to farm
- Loss of total yield
- Unpredictable market
- Possibility of challenging customers
- Unpredictable weather—people won't come to the farm in bad weather, so you'll need to have a back-up plan so that you don't lose your crop
- Need crew for post-PYO clean up (to pick up spoiled crop to minimize disease and increase customer happiness)

“ As society becomes more removed and as land becomes more developed, farms serve a unique role of giving families a place to have fun and be connected to nature and food.”

— Adam Hausmann, Adam's Berry Farm, Charlotte, VT

Assessing Yourself as a PYO Farmer

PYO is wonderful *if and only if* you have the energy to manage it! Many people view running a PYO as an easy option, where free laborers harvest and the farmer sits back to relax. In reality this is far from the truth. In fact, it might be harder to run a PYO operation than harvest solely for wholesale or for a farmers' market. The farm is continually exposed, your work-flow is constantly interrupted, you have daily people management, and you have to have a labor force that can clean up after the PYO customers and harvest ahead of rainy periods.

When thinking about your skills and resources, consider your personality first and foremost. Are you a “people person”? Are you okay with letting go of some of your control? Many operators find that people eat berries when you ask them not to, go exactly where you tell them is off limits, break branches, step on fruit, and ask the same questions over and over. As a PYO farmer, you must want people on your farm and truly find joy in their experience with the land and crop.



Grape harvest at Four Springs Farm, Royalton, VT. (Orah Moore)

PYO operators are more likely to succeed if they are willing and able to:

- Welcome the public on the farm,
- Start small and grow with experience and sales,
- Produce quality products,
- Utilize season extension techniques to offer products over a longer time period,
- Manage costs effectively,
- Train and manage employees effectively,
- Utilize standard operating procedures to illustrate what you expect from public interaction,
- Manage farm safety and liability,
- Provide excellent customer service; anticipate and meet customer needs,
- Promote the operation effectively,
- Communicate effectively with customers and potential customers,
- Have employees that can tell the farm story directly to the customer,
- Build relationships and loyalty with customers,
- Supervise customers,
- Commit to a long-term venture, and
- Be willing to accept higher levels of crop damage from visitors in your fields.

Consistent hours will help establish your business

- Communicate your seasons and hours of operation through multiple channels
- Be open at regular times (especially weekends!)
- Communicate weather or condition-related closings and product availability promptly through multiple channels, including social media. You can also post up-to-date info on localharvest.org and pickyourown.org, which often capture consumers who look online for pick-your-own farms.
- Know what days and times are slowest, and determine whether your time is best spent on farm projects or operating the PYO.

Important Elements of Your PYO Enterprise

When entering the PYO market, focus on crop diversity, farm layout, quality, and advertising and promotion.

CROP DIVERSITY AND PACKAGING

When choosing what crops to offer, carefully consider what works for you and your farm business. Perhaps only one PYO crop fits in with other farm commitments, your workload, accounts, and quality of life. That's okay. Only take on as much responsibility as you can manage while maintaining other aspects of your business. To identify crops, it's a good idea to assess your competition and your customers' preferences. If the farm down the road offers raspberries, can you offer a variety that fruits at a different time of year? Will your customers ask for organic, IPM, or low-spray? What price can they afford?

If you've decided to develop your parking, restrooms, and other infrastructure for visitors, it might make sense to utilize these assets more than just once a year when one crop is in season. Think about offering crops with seasons that complement each other. A full-season-long PYO is exhausting (June through October), be prepared for long hours. Take time to think about the reality and if this works for you and your farm. What has to shift to make it work?

“ We want people's crops to be healthy and bruise-free when they get home. We try to give containers that give them the best chance of success, so they have a quality product and experience.”

— Adam Hausmann, Adam's Berry Farm, Charlotte, VT

Cedar Circle Farm in East Thetford, VT posts frequent updates on picking conditions on their website, along with a general outlook for the season:

- Strawberries: 3 weeks, June into July
- Blueberries: 3 weeks in July
- Herbs: June–September
- Flowers: July–September
- Grape Tomatoes: August–September
- Pumpkins: October

For each crop you harvest, offer appropriate packaging so customers can pick and transport the food they pick. Depending on the farm, a variety of buckets, baskets, wagons, and even sleds for Christmas trees can be used. Choose your packaging based on the qualities of the your crop: fragile berries should be picked into shallow containers to avoid bruising, whereas pumpkins may need to be transported in a small wagon.



FARM LOCATION AND LAYOUT

Your farm must be inviting and welcoming to all because everyone is your guest at a PYO operation. Create a naturally friendly environment that is safe, has clean bathrooms and sinks, plenty of shade, seating, and fun.

An effective layout will create a clear, straightforward experience for customers and farmers. Many perennial pick-your-own crops take a long time to establish, so carefully plan their placement to avoid having to move them later. Annual crops are more flexible; the spring strawberry patch could be next year's pumpkin patch, for example.

When planning, remember that you are creating a destination location, and therefore you need to design and create the feel and look of the property to accommodate guests and facilitate your interactions with them. This can be challenging as you also plan for the efficiencies of production and land use.

When laying out the location and design of the operation, consider:

- Farm's proximity to a large population center.
- Your ability to comply with local zoning ordinances.
- Types and number of expected vehicles entering and exiting the property.
- Number of customers and any characteristics that may affect operation and facility design.
- Adequate space and effective flow of vehicle and pedestrian traffic in the parking lot.
- Flow of customers between parking lot, check-in, container pick-up, fields, retail sales area, checkout, etc.
- Distance from parking lot to customer check-in and farthest picking areas.
- Placement of fields open for PYO in relation to fields recently sprayed/closed to visitors.
- Placement of restroom facilities.
- Placement of farm stand facility.
- Farm traffic flow: hayrides, vehicles carrying customers to and from fields or other areas, vehicles transporting product or conducting other farm work.
- Plans for future expansion.
- Neighbors' sensitivity to noise, traffic, crowds, etc.

Use signs, ropes, fence, and flags to prevent customers from wandering into an area that has recently been sprayed, contains farm equipment, or is otherwise unsuitable for visitors.

Parking

- Do you have enough parking space available?
- Is it clearly marked with enter and exit signs?
- Are your handicapped spaces indicated?
- Are there smooth pathways leading from the parking area to the fields or check-in area?
- Is the town okay with your parking area?
- If your farm is conserved, does your parking conform to any easement restrictions?



Beilke Family Farm, Salem, OR (Mary Stewart)

QUALITY

Quality pertains to the products being picked and a visitor's overall experience at your farm. Quality visitor experiences are safe, fun, and informative. Many farmers believe in offering authentic, educational experiences to customers. This might mean sharing information about the history of the farm, providing recipes and cooking tips, or explaining about your growing practices. Transfer your excitement, passion, and philosophy into your interactions with customers. Remember, taking the time for conversation can lead to customer happiness.

“ Research shows that a satisfied customer will tell four or five others about a pleasant brand experience.”

— Nick Wreden, “How to Recover Lost Customers,” [smartbiz.com](#)

Customer service is an essential part of quality experiences. Remember that PYO can create a positive first interaction with farms for many young kids, which can transfer to future eating habits, food ethics and consumer patterns. If you have hired employees, clearly communicate your expectations to them so they can provide appropriate customer service through verbal communication and/or descriptive signage. An employee manual can be a helpful tool for this. Many customers want the manicured farm feel, not the real grit. To keep the farm neat and tidy, some farmers suggest pretending that the press is coming to the farm every day. Others want to showcase the farm as part of a truly working landscape. Decide what the right strategy is for you, and stick to it. Happy customers are returning customers.

COMMUNICATIONS, ADVERTISING AND PROMOTION

What makes your farm unique and separates you from your competition? Is it your location; diversity of varieties; organic, low-spray, or high-spray practices; the beauty of your land; ease of access; friendly, knowledgeable staff; produce that no one else grows; value-added products; flowers; or educational activities or events? Find your strengths and unique attributes, and develop your promotional efforts around them.

Advertising through roadside signs, social media, TripAdvisor, newspapers, and newsletters may all be helpful. All advertisements should include your farm's location, business hours, working days, types of produce, and any unique services or amenities.

Connect with like-minded businesses nearby and develop a referral network. Drop your materials in hotels and travel hubs. Tell employees at your local cafe when your strawberries are peaking, so they can send customers your way, for example. Create a neighborhood farm trail for car tours or bikers!

Consider pitching a human-interest story to a reporter you know at the local paper or beyond. Announce a new element of your business, hold an event, or report on a field trip you recently hosted. Stay in touch with your customers through newsletters (use a service like Constant Contact or MailChimp), and keep your social media accounts active. Only open as many as you know you can stay on top of. Keep a contact list of farm visitors, and share recipes and farm news with your fans through social media posts and newsletters.

“ We try to visit all the bed-and-breakfasts, local stores that cater to tourists, hotels, gas stations, chambers of commerce, and visitor centers as often as possible and usually show up with some cheese or maple syrup as a thank you for them referring business to us.”

—Betsy Luce, Sugarbush Farm, Pomfret, VT

Ultimately, word of mouth and referrals will most likely be your best form of advertising. By bringing customers to the farm, you can share your farm's story directly, give them a great farm experience, and create inspiring educational moments for all of you. Encourage your customers to share their positive experiences on social media or TripAdvisor.

Financial Planning

Making sound financial choices starts on day one with a market analysis, which will indicate if a profitable market exists for your desired enterprise. Many PYO farmers who are just starting out or running U-pick as a side operation make the mistake of underselling their products. You won't make it if you undersell your products, and you won't help the farming community either. Value yourself and your labor with PYO prices that reflect your true costs of goods, production, fair labor, advertising, distribution, energy, materials, and environmental stewardship. Remember, you cannot count on PYO at first financially. You will need other outlets until the enterprise becomes established and grows.

When you are doing market research, talk to other entrepreneurs, customers, Extension, or your Small Business Development Center. Research the following questions:

- Is there a need in the marketplace for a (or another) PYO? Are there customers interested in picking their own product?
- Can customers be identified and reached through promotional efforts?
- How much product is a typical PYO customer likely to purchase each year?
- Which types of promotional efforts are likely to be needed and how much will they cost?
- How much are customers willing to pay for a PYO product?
- What other sources of local products currently exist?
- What are the characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of competition (other PYOs and sources of similar products)?
- What other opportunities or threats, such as regulations, exist in the marketplace that may affect PYO sales?
- Can the farm produce at a cost low enough and sell enough product at a price high enough to generate a profit?
- Is your product unique enough to survive in a competitive marketplace?

It is essential that you evaluate the potential profitability of your venture. This includes estimating potential revenues and subtracting estimated costs. When estimating revenues from PYO products, consider how



Apple juggling at Mendon Mountain Orchards and Motel in Mendon, VT.

much product you're likely to produce, the number of customers you expect to visit, the typical amount of product customers will likely purchase, the estimated price of the products, and the potential income from the sale of non-PYO products. When estimating costs, producers often focus most on production expenses, but you should include all other costs likely to be incurred by the enterprise. Although not intended as a complete list of all possible expenses, the following items are some possible expenses a PYO operation may incur:

- Ingredients, packaging, and labels for value-added products
- Concession stand and/or retail store inventory
- Check-in area: tent, pavilion, shed, building
- Cash registers, calculators, and other office supplies
- Tables or shelves for product display or storage
- Coolers/freezers for product storage
- Concession stand equipment
- Specialty equipment for PYO customer transport
- Specialty equipment for PYO product packaging (such as a tree shaker)
- Grounds maintenance equipment
- Gravel for driveway or parking lot
- Fencing materials
- Legal-for-trade scale for weighing items sold by the pound
- Trash cans, bags, trash and recycling pick-up services
- Toilet paper, paper towels, hand soap, etc.
- Portable toilet rental and maintenance fees
- Picking containers and product packaging materials
- Wagons or sleds to transport product
- Vehicle repair, maintenance, and fuel
- Benches and/or picnic tables
- Secretary of State trade name registration
- Liability insurance
- Property or vehicle insurance not covered under a farm policy
- Professional services of attorney and/or accountant

“Running a PYO is like a dance where you are trying to keep the farm’s health and the customers’ experience in balance.”

— Adam Hausmann, Adam’s Berry Farm, Charlotte, VT

“We wish we had anticipated how popular our cut-your-own Christmas tree operation would be. When planning (your business), look 5-10 years down the road. Plan for adequate parking as many families come in two vehicles, one with family, one with a truck to bring tree home. People like to linger, chat, sip cocoa and enjoy the experience.”

— Sally Collopy, Collopy Family Farm, Fairfield, VT

- Matching clothing for staff
- Utilities such as water, sewer, electrical, and gas service
- Phone and phone service
- Computer and Internet service
- Wages for PYO employees, including post-PYO harvesting
- Worker’s compensation insurance (if needed)
- Payroll taxes
- Self-employment taxes
- Marketing, including include signage on and off the farm, logo development, website development, design and printing of brochures or other materials, business cards, postage for direct mailings, advertising, etc.



Champlain Orchards in Shoreham, VT, displays pricing using chalkboard paint and a beam in the farm store.

PRICING

Setting prices for pick-your-own crops can be challenging. Start by looking at your cost of production, including goods, production, fair labor, advertising, distribution, energy, materials, and environmental stewardship. Do your best to set pricing that honors your efforts. Factor in customer demographics, values and preferences; characteristics of your competition; market trends; and your business goals.

Some farms charge less for PYO products than pre-picked, but others charge the same, since they know visitors appreciate the experience of picking themselves. Consumers place tremendous value on having freshly harvested products, so don't be afraid to charge for this freshness and quality. Customers can also decrease your yield by leaving product in the field, damaging plants, and sampling. Though some level of in-field sampling is generally unavoidable, and often accepted, it is important to convey to customers — through signs and verbal reminders — that PYO farming is your livelihood and that they should pay for what they pick! Even so, you may want to add a buffer to your prices to account for product that's eaten in the field.

Labor Planning

When planning for labor, factor in the many roles needed in a PYO operation, including people to:

- Greet customers,
- Provide information and direction,
- Transport customers and products to and from the fields and/or parking lot,
- Give directions once customers are in the field,
- Demonstrate picking techniques,
- Be cashiers,
- Harvest overlooked produce.

Labor Budgeting

When budgeting for labor, you may need to account for employment regulations, including:

- Fair Labor Standards Act,
- Child Labor Act,
- Occupational Safety & Health,
- Workers' compensation,
- Unemployment insurance taxes,
- Income tax withholding.

“ The greatest challenges of running a cut-your-own operation are the weather and anticipating sales.”

— Sally Collopy, Collopy Family Farm, Fairfield, VT

As you choose your starting prices, try to anticipate how you may need to increase them in the future. For example, there is less of a psychological barrier in moving from a price of \$3.00 to \$3.15 than in moving from \$2.90 to \$3.05.

For berries, tomatoes, green beans, or other small foods, pricing by volume may be the simplest option, unless you notice customers over-filling containers, in which case pricing by pound might be the better option. Pricing per count may work for larger items.

Another key part of your farm financial picture is determining how you will accept payment. You can take cash and checks, and if you have a smartphone or tablet, you can purchase a mobile credit card processor that allows you to swipe credit and debit cards as long as the device is connected to the Internet via a 3G, 4G or a Wi-Fi connection.



Pick-your-own Christmas Tree at Collopy Family Farm, Fairfield, VT.

Building Your PYO

Operating a PYO is not a simple task. If you determine a PYO may be a potentially successful marketing channel for your farm, it is important to develop a thorough plan for your operation. Remember to take into account what is reasonable to accomplish based on the resources available and the needs and expectations of potential customers. Farmers planning for a PYO should consider:

- Complementary products, attractions, or market channels,
- Operation layout/design,
- Production planning,
- Parking and customer flow,
- Product packaging and transport,
- Additional customer comfort considerations,
- Hours/days of operation,
- Labor needs and employee training,
- Liability and risk management,
- Food safety for edible PYO products,
- Pricing,
- Payment options,
- Promotion,
- Communicating with and supervising customers on the farm,
- Addressing theft,
- Evaluating the PYO experience,
- Impact on rest of farm operation.

COMPLEMENTARY PRODUCTS, ATTRACTIONS, OR MARKET CHANNELS

PYO marketing may be a foundation for business growth and expansion. Producers may consider adding new crops to extend the time of year when the operation is open or offer pre-picked or complementary products or services in an on-farm retail market. Listen to customers and staff recommendations for ideas on what to consider adding to the farm.



Mike Isham, a fifth-generation farmer, gives wagon rides to pumpkin pickers at Isham Family Farm, Williston, VT.

Value-added products, such as jams and other preserves, can utilize surplus or lower-quality fruit and add to the retail product mix. Complementary products such as pumpkin-carving kits, Christmas tree stands, or decorations such as straw bales or tree ornaments may also increase sales. A PYO pumpkin operation may consider adding apples to start the season earlier or Christmas trees to extend the season.

Many PYO farms also conduct school tours. Pumpkin, fruit, and Christmas tree farms are all popular destinations for schools. You'll need to consider your availability during the school day, how to address potential liability concerns, and how tours might affect your existing business both positively and negatively. School tours may help promote the PYO operation as well. Producers may be able to send information with teachers to give students to take home.

Adding complementary products and services may involve additional regulations. For example, producers

Common Characteristics of PYO Customers

- Motivated by freshness, quality, price, and the experience of visiting the farm
- Have higher income and education levels than the average population
- Travel 20–25 miles to the farm
- Typically average 50 years in age
- Attend the farm in groups of two or more
- Frequently bring children
- Seek healthy food: organic or low-spray
- Want a farm experience to connect to and understand where their food comes from

with concession stands selling products other than pre-packaged items will need to work with their local health department to meet food service requirements and obtain a food service permit. Farmers making value-added food products such as jams and jellies or baked goods for off-site consumption will need to obtain appropriate permitting from the Department of Health. Sales of products other than those raised and sold by the farmer may require the operator to collect and remit sales tax.

RISK MANAGEMENT

Bringing guests to the farm can expose both your visitors and farm to hazards and risk. Aside from trampling plants, visitors can introduce a suite of food safety risks. Share your hygiene plan with visitors, and ask them to wash hands before entering your fields. Request that they leave their dogs and pets at home, or have a specific dog area with baggies and trash receptacles. Create a written pet policy to back you up if someone shows up with an animal that's not permitted on your farm. If visitors have a fever or are ill, ask them to come back another day.

To help protect your business, post signs indicating where guests are and are not welcome, and purchase adequate liability insurance. Remember to fence any ponds and large equipment areas. For more information on risk management, see "A Guide to Successful Agritourism Enterprises," also in this series.

If selling wholesale, some buyers require that wholesale products be segregated from PYO products either in time or space.

EVALUATING AND ADAPTING

How will you know if you're successful? Develop some indicators that will help you evaluate each season. Ask customers for input throughout the season via an idea board or suggestion box. If you have staff members, ask them for feedback as well. Everyone involved will have valuable perspectives and opinions! Also, be sure to track:

- Number of customers,
- Total sales,
- Average sale per customer,
- Sales by product or product category,
- Expenses by category,

- Weather conditions,
- Timing and method of promotions,
- How customers are learning about the operation,
- Where customers are coming from,
- Injuries or accidents, and
- Customer complaints or suggestions.

All of this information will inform your choices about how you adapt your operation to meet your goals.

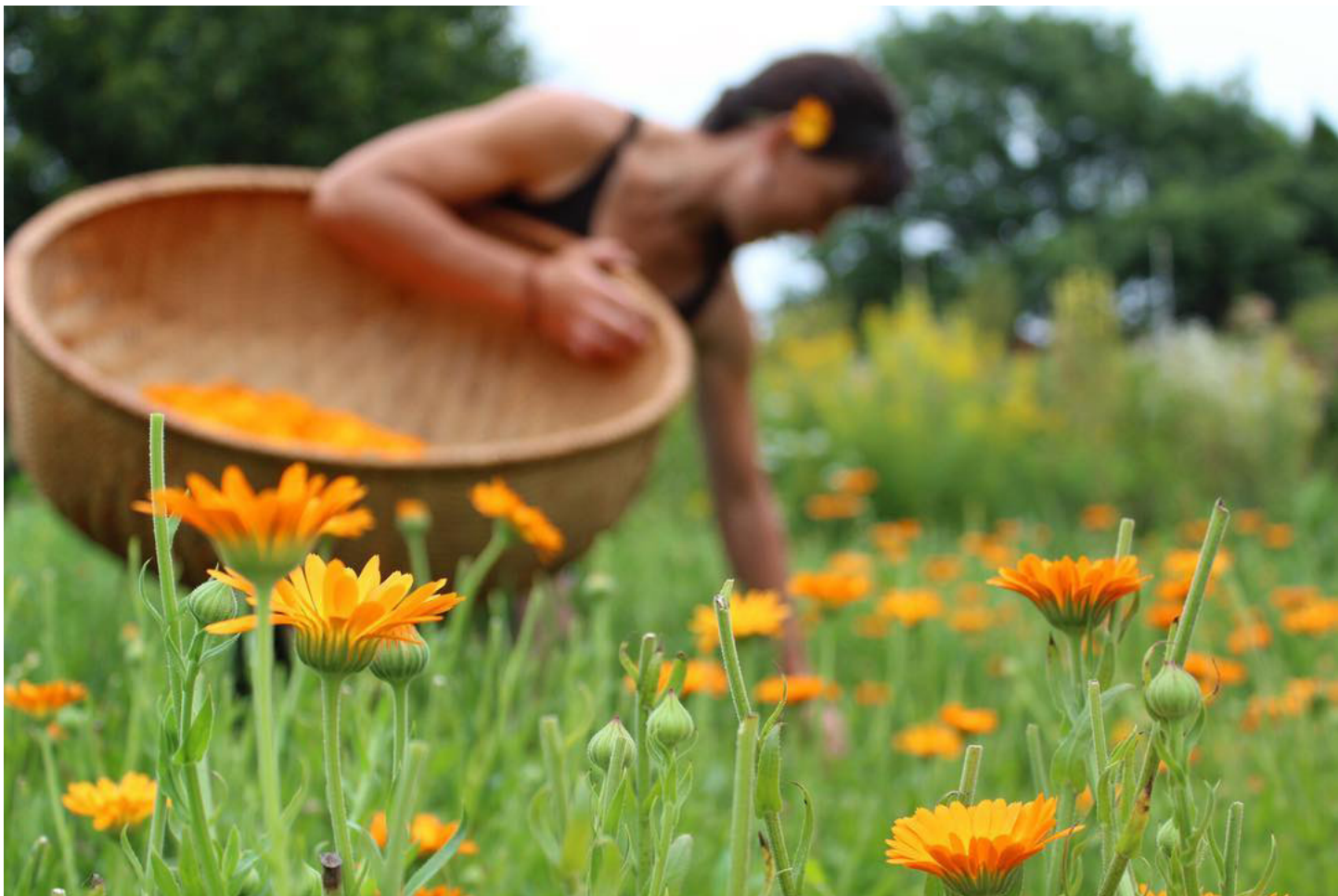
Pick-your-own is a wonderful way to connect people to their food and the natural environment. As with any part of your enterprise, it's okay to start small, assess, and grow over time.

“ [One of the greatest rewards of running a PYO] is when folks stop by during pumpkin, and especially Christmas tree season, and tell me how they love having berries in the freezer that they picked at the farm.”

— Mike Isham, Isham Family Farm Williston, VT



At Knoll Farm in Fayston, VT, farmer Helen Whybrow serves wood-fired cinnamon buns from her oven next to the PYO blueberry fields. (Vera Simon-Nobes)



Credit: Avena Botanicals, Rockport, Maine.

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REFERENCES: "Common Characteristics of PYO Customers" from North Carolina State University, "Relative Importance of Factors Affecting Customer's Decision to Buy Pick-Your-Own Versus Pre-harvested Fruit at North Carolina Farms." *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 2008; and Adam Hausmann, Adam's Berry Farm, Charlotte, VT.

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