

# Offering High-Quality On-Farm Experiences



**T**oday more than ever, farmers are discovering innovative ways to diversify their farms, one of which is by offering agritourism activities. Visitors can spend time on a farm to experience agriculture and the working landscape. Agritourism is the sister industry to ecotourism. It answers tourists' desires for experiences that connect them to the culture and story of a place.

Since every farm is unique, guests can visit farm after farm and always encounter something new. Activities on a single farm may change with the season, which makes the farm a continually fresh destination for the tourist. This chapter outlines many types of agritourism, and the qualities that successful agritourism farms share, including authenticity, safe environments and facilities, educational experiences, and strong customer service.

## Authenticity in Agritourism

In many places, “agritourism” activities could include a slide near a corn field, a farm gift shop where you can decorate animal-shaped cookies, and a blow-up pumpkin bouncy house near a pumpkin field. However, as the industry has grown throughout the United States, many farmers have remained committed to offering activities that authentically represent farming.

Visitor experiences don't have to be complicated. Guests will relish the opportunity to see a cow up close, meet a chicken, watch a pig take a nap, or taste a freshly picked carrot. All of these activities will influence how they understand farms and food, and how they value farms and farmers.

### Top 3 reasons people vacation:

- to build and strengthen relationships
- to improve health and well-being
- to rest and relax

— University of California Small Farm Center

## Agritourism's Role in a Farm Business

### Supplementary Enterprise

Agritourism as a minor activity that supports other products on the farm.

### Complementary Enterprise

Agritourism activities share equal footing with other enterprises in the farm's product mix.

### Primary Enterprise

Agritourism as the dominant/primary activity on the farm.

SOURCE: Rich, et al. *Agritourism: Opportunities for farm diversification*. North Carolina State University Extension, 2010.

## Green Mountain Girls Farm



### An Authentic Agritourism Experience

Green Mountain Girls Farm in Northfield, VT, offers a CSA, a full-diet farmstand, community activities in their barn, overnight accommodations and several activities that visitors can sign up for. "Step beyond our barnyard and into our farm operation. Join the learning adventure of farming via tours and hands-on farm experiences," they write. Activities include cooking classes, cheesemaking classes, in-depth farmer-led tours, goat-milking assistant, welcoming the baby chicks, and more. Each is priced appropriately.

## Authentic Experiences on Your Farm

What are some authentic experiences that you or a collaborator could offer on your farm?

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## Safe Environments and Facilities

You should ensure that your property and facilities are well maintained and in compliance with zoning, health, and environmental regulations. It is useful as well to create a risk-management plan for your farm and keep in mind the Americans with Disabilities Act, which mandates equal customer access to certain facilities (entrances, exits, and bathrooms).

Be sure that your farm has adequate staff to provide necessary information to visitors, as well as the infrastructure for basic services such as parking, transportation, signage, and restrooms.

Tell your insurance agent about all the activities that you are offering, and make sure you have adequate coverage. For more information, read the "Safety and Risk Management" chapter.

## Educational Experiences: Farmer-Led

Your farm is a classroom, and as the farmer, you are in a unique position to interpret all that happens on your farm to the public. At any given location on your property, there are lessons in weather, microorganisms, history, soil, water, plant species, and farm products. You can teach guests about your farm through group or customized tours, field trips, workshops, tastings, and more. When working with guests of any age, keep these tips in mind:

- Guests will love seeing, hearing, smelling, and above all *tasting* your farm. Fresh product may be their most lasting memory of your farm. Tasting products can be a simple or complex process (caramel on a popsicle stick or a caramel paired with other local or exotic products). *See at right.*
- Set the tone when you first meet with your guests. What will they see? Where is the restroom located? How long will they be on their feet?
- When possible, organize your visitor experiences sequentially so it's easy for guests to follow the processes you are describing. Back at home, will they be able to explain to a friend how your product is made or how your animals are raised?

## Farmer's Speak

### Why do you offer agritourism?

"We're building a whole pie. The more agritourism activities in Vermont, the better it is for all of us. It attracts more people here."

"To be less physical, more cerebral. That's part of our goal as we age."

"By putting a price on a farm experience, it starts to teach consumers that farmers are valuable."

## Sensory Experiences on Your Farm

What sensory experiences can you offer your guests?

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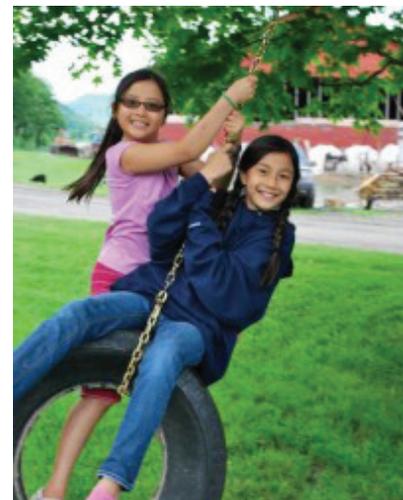


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## Liberty Hill Farm

### An Authentic Agritourism Experience

Liberty Hill Farm and Inn in Rochester, VT, is a Cabot dairy farm that sells registered Holstein cows. In 1984, owners Bob and Beth Kennett opened their doors as a farm vacation destination. Liberty Hill Farm has welcomed guests from all 50 states and from around the world, many of whom return year after year. For the overnight guest, the day begins with a bountiful country breakfast and ends with a homemade, sit-down meal around the dining-room table. In between, guests can cuddle the barn kittens, collect eggs, chase chickens, and feed newborn calves. The Kennetts write, "By sharing the joys and challenges of farming life, we have seen our guests come to appreciate how closely our different ways of life intertwine. Each time a guest buys a product from an independent farm, whether cheese in the grocery store or fresh produce at a farmers' market, they help sustain family farms."



**“ Diversification into tours, U-pick operations, farm stores, pumpkin patches, agricultural festivals, and farm stands is not a substitute for a pro-family farm agenda. [However,] one of my fears is that if farmers and ranchers are too tardy in their response to this emerging opportunity, theme park operators will develop simulated farms and operate them as agritourism attractions.”**

– Desmond Jolly, Former Director, UC Davis Small Farm Program

- Instead of giving all the information, have guests come up with it themselves. Asking questions will encourage guests to think and discover on their own and will help you assess their level of knowledge. For example, you might say, “This is complicated milking parlor machinery. How do you think it works?” Let them think for a few seconds, then give a hint or two if there is no response. If you have trouble creating thought-provoking questions, try putting “why” or “how” in front of almost any statement to help change it into a question. “What would happen if...” is also a useful phrase for the start of a question.
- Remember the “teachable moment.” If the guests’ attention is diverted to the manure spreader in the field, stop what you’re doing and talk about it.

**“ Many people want the true experience, not so much a “tourist” stop. What’s the difference? Not over commercialized, really getting to learn about how the product is produced, not a lot of things for sale that we don’t make. Love your life on the farm, love your products, enjoy meeting people, or don’t bother.”**

– Bette Lambert, Silloway Maple, Randolph, VT

## Sandiwood Farm

### Safe Agritourism Practices: Dining



At Sandiwood Farm in Wolcott, VT, owners Sara and Bob Schlosser have taken many twists and turns since they started farming 25 years ago, but they remain committed to growing food for their community and welcoming people to the farm for farm-to-fork sunset dinners. The year 2012 marked the start of their long-planned transition to agritourism, and over three years they have honed the visitor experience. One of the most impressive parts of their dinner is their staff-to-visitor ratio. Sara and Bob collaborate with their two kids, Chef

Sandi and Kyle, and employ at least 10 community members who guide guests into parking spots, chat with them as they pass hors d’oeuvres, and help them find their seats, the Port-O-Let, the rows of cover crops, or anything else they’re interested in learning about. For dinner, they serve incredible food prepared by Chef Sandi of Vermont Harvest Catering. By using a caterer (in this case, their daughter), the meals also comply with the Vermont Department of Health. They also have a licensed bartender who serves alcohol at a cash bar.

## Seek Out Partnerships

By partnering with others, you can broaden your farm's offerings dramatically. Want to serve food on the farm, but can't do it yourself? Work with a catering business to create a farm dinner. Looking to use your barn, yurt, or pavilion for a group experience? Consider if there is a yoga teacher looking to host outdoor classes. Want to celebrate the biodiversity on your farm? Work with an ornithologist to host a bird watching program. Don't be afraid to put together unconventional partnerships. These

may catch the eye of new customers, media, and neighbors! When partnering, consider working with groups from another "sector", such as your local wood manufacturers association, the maple sugarmakers group, cheese council, or the mountain bike association. When partnering with an establishment that offers overnight accommodations, make sure you share the information with your state's department of tourism so they can help promote your offerings.

## Educational Experiences: Self-Guided

Educational experiences don't have to be delivered person to person. Here are just a few examples of how some farmers educate their visitors through self-guided opportunities:

- When farm members visit Someday Farm in East Dorset, VT, they can find farm-related activities inside plastic bags in mailboxes around the property. Farmers can continue to work while guests can engage with the farm and learn.
- At the Killdeer Farm Stand in Norwich, VT, the staff writes a question on a dry erase board each day, and customers can answer it. This is a fun, interactive activity that keeps things fresh and keeps information flowing.
- At Spring Brook Farm in Reading, VT, an interpretive walk through the woods gives hikers reason to pause and take in the setting.

There are many other tools for self-guided education:

- Interpretive signage
- Captioned photographs on walls
- Signs along a path with facts about your farm
- Activities like scavenger hunts
- Color wheel matching activities (i.e., find flowers that match the colors)

## Kids Books on the Farm

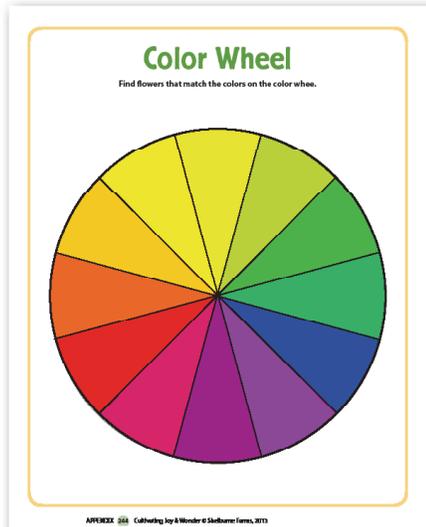
Here are some of our favorite titles.

- *Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table*, Jacqueline Briggs Martin
- *A Garden for a Groundhog*, Loran Balian
- *A Seed Is Sleepy*, Diana Aston
- *Flip: The True Story of a Dairy Farm Goat*, Jane Moncure
- *Tops and Bottoms*, Janet Stevens
- *Ugly Vegetables*, Grace Lin
- *Tiny Seed*, Eric Carle
- *Diary of a Worm*, Doreen Cronin
- *How to Make an Apple Pie and See the World*, Marjorie Priceman

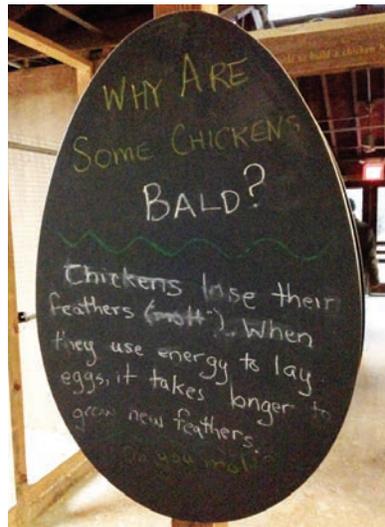
**A Reading Corner:** Consider having a small reading corner on your farm where kids can rest and enjoy a book.

**A Story Walk:** A Story Walk is a book displayed as single pages along a path. You can borrow a StoryWalk® book or purchase two copies of one book, hard-laminate the pages, then mount each page on stakes. *StoryWalk®* was created by Anne Ferguson of Montpelier, VT and has developed with the help of Rachel Senechal, Kellogg-Hubbard Library. *More information.*

# Self-Guided Educational Experiences: Some Ideas for Your Farm



Color wheel (above) and Scavenger Hunt (at right), both from *Cultivating Joy & Wonder: Educating for Sustainability in Early Childhood Through Nature, Food, and Community*. Shelburne Farms, 2013.



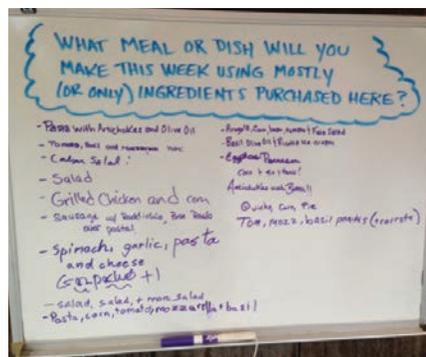
Chalkboard question and answer, Drumlin Farm Wildlife Sanctuary, Lincoln, MA.



An interpretive walk at Spring Brook Farm, Reading, VT.



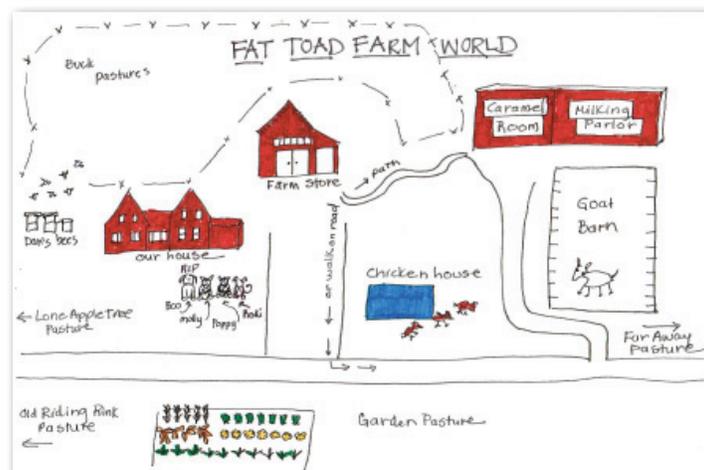
Someday Farm in East Dorset, VT, tucks activities into mailboxes around the property.



Killdeer Farm Stand in Norwich, VT, writes a question on a dry erase board each day. Customers answer it.

**MOTION, MUSIC & MANNERISMS: A Farm Animal Scavenger Hunt!**

MOTION	MUSIC	MANNERISMS	ANIMAL PRODUCTS	MYSTERY
An animal that is walking 	A chicken "clucking" 	An animal chewing its cud 	Fleece from the sheep 	A tool to brush the cow 
An animal moving quickly 	A sheep "baaaing" 	An animal drinking 	Feather duster 	A salt lick 
An animal that is swimming 	A pig "snorting" 	An animal's sneezing 	Morture 	A sign that tells you not to touch the fence! 
An animal moving on 2 legs 	An insect "buzzing" 	An animal scratching itself 	An egg 	A tool to move manure 
An animal moving on 4 legs 	A farmer "talking" 	An animal eating hay 	Milk 	A wheelbarrow 



(Right) When Fat Toad Farm in Brookfield, VT, offered tours of its goat milking operation, staff would pass out this map so that guests could navigate the farmstead.

### Looking for educational resources?

The Farm-Based Education Network is a free member network established to strengthen and support the work of educators, farmers, and community leaders who are providing access and experiences of all kinds on productive, working farms. The FBEN can connect you with farm-based education resources.

There are also many helpful websites, publications, and workshops. For starters:

- [Farm-Based Education Network](#)
- [Life Lab](#)
- [Edible Schoolyard Network](#)
- [National Farm to School Network](#)
- Project Seasons: Hands-On Activities for Discovering the Wonders of the World. Shelburne Farms
- Cultivating Joy and Wonder: Educating for Sustainability in Early Childhood through Nature, Food and Community. Shelburne Farms ([download it for free](#))
- Shelburne Farms farm-based education workshops. See their [calendar](#).

## Strong Customer Service

Customer service is exhibited both in the way you present your farm and in how you treat visitors. If you have paid staff members, they are likely your biggest expense, but also your greatest asset. Training your staff to interact with customers in an informed and helpful way will ensure a safe, high-quality experience for customers. It also ensures these customers will return and tell other potential customers about your business. Your staff should understand your farming practices and be prepared to answer all sorts of questions. *Why do you dock tails? Why does it smell? Why do the sheep have to be fenced? Where is the farmer? Where is the closest cafe?*

Whether you're a one-person operation or you manage staff, developing a customer service plan will be helpful. Your plan should address the following:

- **Customer Needs, Wants and Expectations:** Find out what services your customers need, want, and expect to receive from your enterprise. Consider

surveying customers, interviewing or holding focus groups, asking employees about their observations on customer needs, and tracking customer comments and complaints.

“A satisfied customer will tell four or five others about a pleasant experience. It costs three to five times more to replace a lost customer than to keep one.”

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

- **Values Around Customer Service:** Work with staff to determine what a welcoming environment feels like to customers coming to your farm. Brainstorm the values that are at the root of your customer service philosophy, and talk with staff about the importance of consistently providing this level of service.
- **Customer Service Policies:** Develop policies for your enterprise that encourage employees to display a positive attitude, keep facilities neat, treat each customer like a VIP, and handle complaints appropriately.
- **Employee Hiring:** If you are entrusting your enterprise to staff, make sure they're the right people. Don't forget to check references during a hiring process, and ask prospective employees about how they handle stressful situations, inclement weather, thinking on the fly, disruptive customers, etc. Employees should show up on time, communicate clearly, be clean and prepared for work. Implement regular employee check-ins to give feedback, and to receive feedback, too!
- **Employee Training Policies:** Train employees to focus on details, implement customer service policies, and follow all safety protocols.
- **Customer Service Evaluation:** Evaluate the effectiveness of your customer service plan and make changes where needed.



Shelburne Fams, Shelburne, VT

**“ There is no more important factor to retail success than a friendly, happy, knowledgeable, efficient, proficient staff.”**

– Scott Woolsey, Retail and Customer Service Manager  
Killdeer Farm and Farm Stand, Norwich, VT

*As you identify what activities to offer on your farm, it will be important to stay flexible, assess your progress, and adapt as you gain experience. Keep good records on attendance, expenses, and receipts; how customers learn about you; and, of course, your overall well-being. Do your program offerings help you reach one of your farm's goals? What do you most enjoy about guests, and what do guests most enjoy about your farm? Ask yourself these questions and more as you plan for visitors.*

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Funding for the 2019 edition of “A Guide to Successful Agritourism Enterprises” was provided by the Agriculture Marketing Resource Center (AgMRC), located at Iowa State University, [www.agmrc.org](http://www.agmrc.org). AgMRC is a national website dedicated to providing information to producers and service providers on value-added agriculture businesses.

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COVER PHOTO by Vera Chang

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## Also in this series:

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- Host Dinners on Your Farm
- Host Summer Camp on Your Farm
- Develop a Farm Stand
- Develop a Farm Stay
- Develop a Farm Tour
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The original 2014 edition of this publication was made possible by support from the U.S. Small Business Administration and The Canaday Family Charitable Trust. It is also the result of tax-supported funding from USDA, Rural Development, and as such cannot be copyrighted. It may be reprinted with the customary crediting of the source. Each chapter was published as a result of a project of the Rutland Regional Planning Commission, Farm-Based Education Network and Vermont Farms! Association, coordinated by Vera Simon-Nobes.

### Assessing Your Farm for Agritourism

REFERENCES: “Keys to Agritourism Success” from Holly Born. *Keys to Success in Value-Added Agriculture*. Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and the National Center for Appropriate Technology ATTRA Project, 2001. Western Profiles of Innovative Agricultural Marketing. THIS CHAPTER was originally written as a result of the East Coast Agritourism Webinar Series, a partnership between North Carolina State University and Rutgers University. Authors include: Stephen Komar, Agricultural and Resource Management Agent; Brian Schilling, Extension Specialist in Agricultural Policy; Jenny Carleo, Agricultural and Resource Management Agent; Susan Colucci, Area Specialized Agent, Agriculture, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service; Samantha Rozier Rich, Assistant Professor and Tourism Extension Specialist, North Carolina State University; Stacy Tomas, Assistant Professor and Tourism Extension Specialist, North Carolina State University. It was adapted in 2014 by Vera Simon-Nobes, VT Farms! Association.

### Business & Financial Planning

REFERENCES: “What Is a Business Plan?” from “Agritourism in Focus: A Guide for Tennessee Farmers,” University of Tennessee Extension, Center for Profitable Agriculture. “Choice of Business Entities” and “General Regulations” from “A Legal Guide to the Business of Farming in Vermont,” University of Vermont Extension and Annette Higby Esq., 2006. “Budgeting” from Roth and J.A. Hyde. “Partial Budgeting for Agricultural Businesses,” G.W. Penn State Agricultural Research and Cooperative Extension, 2002. “Navigating Local Land Use Regulations” from Agricultural Marketing Resources Center, 1111 NSRIC, Iowa State University. THIS CHAPTER was based on the Rutgers Extension training module, “Financial Management: Budgeting and Pricing for Agritourism.” It was adapted in 2014 by Barbara Noyes Pulling, Rutland Regional Planning Commission. Land use content was written by Barbara Noyes Pulling, Rutland Regional Planning Commission, with support from Stephanie Smith, Vermont Agency of Agriculture. Reviewed by John Ryan, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund and Sam Smith, Intervale Center. Chris Granstrom, Lincoln Peak Winery; Jordan Von Trapp, Bliss Ridge Farm; Peg Elmer, Community Resilience and Chairperson of Farm to Plate Agricultural Land Use Planning Task Force; Dean Pierce, Director of Planning and Zoning, Shelburne, VT; and Lisa Chase, University of Vermont Extension.

### Offering High-Quality On-Farm Experiences

REFERENCES: “Strong Customer Service” from “Agritourism in Focus: A Guide for Tennessee Farmers,” University of Tennessee Extension. THIS CHAPTER was based on: “Best Management Practices in Agritourism,” by Lisa Chase and Varna M. Ramaswamy, University of Vermont Extension; Steven W. Burr and Jascha Zeitlin, Utah State University Extension; Gary P. Green and Michael Dougherty, University of Wisconsin; Vermont Farms! Association. Marketing Resource Center, 2007 Adapted in 2014 by Vera Simon Nobes, Vermont Farms! Association. Reviewed by Lisa Chase, University of Vermont Extension; Kim Goodling, Vermont Grand View Farm.

### Safety & Risk Management

THIS CHAPTER was originally published as a result of a Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program award, “Extension Training to Support Agritourism Development in the Northeast.” Authors include: Brian Schilling, Assistant Extension Specialist in Agricultural Policy, Rutgers University, Lisa Chase, Natural Resource Specialist, University of Vermont, Stephen Komar, Agricultural and Resource Management Agent, Rutgers University, Lucas Marxen, Assistant Director of Research Technology, Office of Research Analytics, Rutgers University. It was adapted in 2014 to include components of the Northeast Kingdom Travel and Tourism Association’s *Agritourism On-Site Farm Safety Guide*. This 2014 edition was edited by Vera Simon-Nobes, Vermont Farms! Association and Mick Poletta and Barbara Noyes Pulling, Rutland Regional Planning Commission.

### Marketing

THIS CHAPTER was based on the Rutgers Extension training module, “Marketing Agritourism While Providing Quality Customer Service.” Adapted in 2014 by Vera Simon-Nobes, Vermont Farms! Association. Reviewed by Lisa Chase, University of Vermont Extension; Tamara White, Wing and a Prayer Farm; Rose Wilson, Rose Wilson Business Development Services; Pam Knights, Pam Knights Communications.