

Develop a Farm Tour

AGRITOURISM BEST PRACTICES SERIES

People everywhere have a growing interest in what they eat and where it comes from. As a farmer, you can play a role in educating them about farms and the working landscape, while gaining exposure for your farm through offering farm tours. Tours can be designed for large or small groups, for elderly or preschool-aged people, and for professionals of a specific trade or curious consumers. What do you need to know to put together your tour? This chapter will offer some tips.

Organizing Your Tour

- Provide a clear place to park and a comfortable gathering area out of the wind and rain. Friendly signage helps. Let your visitors know that they are welcome guests who are supposed to be there.
- Make sure you have the right infrastructure (outhouses, handwashing stations, parking) and use signs to direct people to the appropriate places.
- A little hospitality goes a long way: warm tea on a cold day, strawberries, fresh bread, or cookies. No matter what else is going on that day, be on time (early), and be “present” when speaking with the group.
- Introduce yourself and what you do on the farm.
- Set the tone at the beginning. What will guests see? Can they interrupt you to ask questions? Where is the restroom? How long will they be on their feet?

“ When I develop a tour with a farmer, I stress the importance of sharing your personal story: how you got here and why you’re doing it. Aside from the hospitality aspect, this is priority number one. Visitors need to connect with you before they can connect with your farm.”

— Chris Howell, Vermont Farm Tours

- Get to know your guests by asking them to introduce themselves. What brought them to the farm? Provide name tags!
- Make sure your customers are comfortable. Keep them dry and well fed. If the tour is longer than an hour, or you have someone in the group with mobility challenges, make sure you provide seating at some point during the tour. Even standing for an hour can be tiring.
- Organize your tour in a sequential way, so it’s easy for guests to follow the processes you are describing. When they get home that day, will they be able to explain to a friend how your product is made?
- Eye contact is important. Make sure to situate yourself so that the group can look at you without looking into the sun.
- Guests will love seeing, hearing, smelling, but above all, *tasting* your farm fresh product. It may be the most significant memory they leave with. Tastings can range from simple to complex (cut-up tomato slices to tomato and sea salt pairings).

- Consider sanitation, and make sure you're not offering samples after guests pet calves or hold chickens. Build in time for hand-washing, and make handwashing facilities easily accessible.
- Leave time for questions, and 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.
- Remember the "teachable moment." If guests' attention is diverted to the manure spreader in the field, stop what you're doing or saying and talk about it.
- Have products available for sale. When possible, sell products from other producers that complement your own (e.g., hot cocoa powder along with milk, crackers with cheese, cookbooks, etc.)
- Collect visitors' information so you can add it to your mailing list and let them know about future events.
- After your guests are done with the tour, can they continue to walk around the barn? Can they picnic on the lawn? Do you have a recommendation of a lunch spot? Before you say goodbye to the group, make recommendations for what they can do next. If they're visiting from out of town, they'll look forward to your suggestions of places to visit and things to do.

“ I have found that even though we have a staff of seven, people are really impressed when a member of the family or a 'real' farmer does the tour- it makes them feel so much more connected. We find that with bus tours we usually end up selling several hundred dollars more per bus if my sons or I do the tour rather than one of our employees.”

– Betsy Luce, Sugarbush Farm, Pomfret, VT

“ Consider your guest audience and their needs. Are they tourists looking to learn about and buy Vermont products? Teens who need physical activity and food? Families who need a safe place for kids to run around while they learn about the farm? The pace, length, and tour content will change depending on the group. If possible, get to know the basics about your audience before they arrive.”

– Chris Howell, Vermont Farm Tours

WILL YOUR TOUR BE SPECIFIC OR GENERAL?

You may decide to offer a specific tour that teaches guests about one element of your farm or a general tour where you share a little about your whole farm. Both tours will attract customers and educate the public. General tours may have a wider appeal, while focused tours may attract visitors who are looking to learn about a specific product or farm system. Consider what you offer, what you know intimately, and what you're passionate about, then determine your tour's focus. Themes could include soil restoration, renewable energy, life cycles of plants or animals, interdependence, etc. Not everything you talk about needs to tie into the theme, but maybe you introduce it at the start and reconnect to the theme a few times throughout.

Marketing language for a GENERAL tour

“Central Vermont” farm is a historic dairy farm located on a hillside about 30 minutes off of Route 89. Join Farmer Casey for a tour of their dairy barn, their sugar shack where they produce delicious maple syrup, meet their heritage pigs, and gather eggs from their flock of laying hens. Conclude the tour with a taste of this year's maple syrup.

Pet Policy

Develop a pet policy to keep your crops, animals, and other visitors safe and happy. If you don't allow dogs, find out where the nearest dog-friendly park is so you can recommend a place they can bring their pet.

Sample Tour Description



Green Mountain Girls Farm Northfield, VT

Meet the Farm & Farmers (45 minutes)

Get a quick introduction to all of the livestock and gardens, or focus your time in one or two areas of particular interest. On this introductory tour, you will meet the animals on pasture (or in the barn, if it is winter), learn about how we raise them and what they eat, as well as see our vegetable gardens. There will be plenty of time to ask questions, decide which animal is your favorite, and to snap some great photos. Stops at the tractor for photo-ops can generally be arranged. Good for all ages. It is a walking tour over some uneven ground. \$10/person, \$30 minimum.

In-Depth Farmer Tour (2 hours, includes farm-fresh snack)

Spend a few hours touring our farm, and you'll come away with memories, great stories, and probably a new favorite animal. We will share stories of the farm and its characters while we introduce you to our livestock

and crops. You'll get to enjoy seeing our goats, pigs, and poultry on pasture as they eat, dig, frolic, or just lounge in their mud puddle, if it is a hot day.

Many who raise livestock on pasture call themselves "grass farmers," and we hold that as a proud and accurate label for our work. But our more primary identity is as "relationship farmers." For example, we nurture connections between our soils and our produce, and we believe that we — our customers as well as ourselves — can know and name our animals, ultimately appreciating not only the taste and health qualities of grass-fed meat but also the meaning it holds. Our complex bottom line results from our understanding of these interrelationships, and we will share them with you, answering your questions about the livestock and crops and what it takes to make it all work.

Our tour will conclude with a farm-fresh snack at our farm stand. Good for all ages. It is a walking tour over some uneven ground. \$25/person, \$50 minimum.

Sample Tour Description

Askinosie Chocolate Springfield, MO



Our award-winning chocolate tastes even better once you've visited our factory on Commercial Street in Springfield, MO. We love to welcome visitors from near and far to learn all

about how and why we make chocolate and of course nibble on some samples along the way. Our tours offer a behind-the-scenes look into the details of what it takes to craft exceptional chocolate, enjoyed by fans across the globe. Our doors are open to you for public tours every Tuesday at 3:00 p.m. and on select Saturdays in the summer, as well as during the holiday season.

Our informative tour will take you around the factory, allowing you a peek inside the secretive world of chocolate-making. We'll provide a concise education

Due to popular demand, we've added another Factory Tour exclusively for summer 2019!

Join us for a smaller and more intimate look at our bean to bar production process Friday afternoons at 12:30 p.m.— and hurry!

on how we make our bean-to-bar chocolate, including our ingredients and the type of equipment utilized. We'll also discuss our Direct Trade practices, our community involvement, Chocolate University, and even delve deep into each of our origins. And don't fret, because we provide plenty of tasty samples of our chocolate at various stages of our process throughout the tour. Tours lasts approximately 45 minutes and you are welcome to stay and shop at your leisure, with your 10% tour discount. Tickets: \$5/adults; \$4/children and students.

Sample Tour Description

Hawthorne Valley Farm Hudson, NY



HAWTHORNE VALLEY farm

Get your farm questions answered! Get a

glimpse into the role we all play in the production of food and the integration of people, animals and the land. Learn about land stewardship practices and the role of agriculture in education, cultural enrichment, and scientific inquiry.

Public tours are given by appointment and are approximately 50 minutes long. Reservations are required with at least one week’s notice. Group tours can be arranged; cost varies, please inquire.

There is no charge for farm tours, though donations to support place-based education programs are gladly accepted.

“ It’s a good idea to communicate expectations about children always being under adult supervision. This rule needs to be on signs and said out loud at the start of the tour and during it. As much as we love children running free, a working farm can present a lot of hazards that are unimaginable for a visitor and the farmer.”

– Melisa Oliva, Ananda Gardens, Montpelier, VT

Marketing language for a THEMED tour

“Central Vermont” farm raises heritage pigs on their historic farm just 30 minutes from Route 89. Visit Farmer Casey to meet the sows and newest litter of piglets, who will fertilize the fields and eat pasture to grow big and strong this summer. Learn about the breed history, name a piglet, and help plant pumpkin seeds to produce feed for the pigs this fall. End the tour with a bacon tasting, featuring the farm’s traditionally cured bacon along with their favorite pairings – dark chocolate, house-made strawberry jam, and bacon-wrapped figs.

YOUR FARM’S ATTRIBUTES

Your farm is a living, breathing system that is worth sharing. But how do you move from seeing your farm as your place of work to seeing it as a destination that will captivate visitors? Try walking around it with friends. Ask them what they notice and find most interesting, then plan a route that includes those points of interest and avoids hazardous areas, uneven ground, or attractive nuisances. (See table below)

Photography

Consider inviting your guests and visitors to take photos in specific places: the most scenic view, near the animals, against painted wooden panels with space for heads. Share the hashtag you hope they’ll use on social media, and ask them for permission to repost if the photos are great!

On first glance you see ...	But with a little thought, you see...
A barn that needs a coat of paint	A barn that was built in 1890 and has weathered storm after storm, provided shelter for an assortment of livestock, and housed various milking technologies.
A ewe that’s a little leaner than you want her to be this time of year.	A beautiful sheep who’s putting calories into making milk for her twin lambs.
A chicken yard that’s overused.	Chickens that are taking dust baths to stay clean! Who knew that’s how they stay healthy and happy?
Fruit trees that need pruning.	Why do fruit trees have a place on your farm? Do they attract pollinators? Have they been there for generations? What do you do with the fruit?
Tricycles the kids left outside.	The kids here are the 4th generation born on the farm, and are growing up with a connection to food systems and life cycles that is rare today. They have chores but find a lot of time to play.



A farmer and guest on a field walk during a farm tour in Plainfield, Vermont.

SELF-GUIDED TOURS

With good signage, a well-marked trail, or a map, you can also offer self-guided tours, but make sure someone is on the premises to greet visitors and answer their questions. Give visitors a map of your farm that points out interesting buildings, rough terrain, or areas that are off limits. You can also write a scavenger hunt that is unique to your farm and fun for all ages. Make sure you communicate clearly about any safety hazards on the property before sending guests off on their own! Read more about on-farm safety in “A Guide to Successful Agritourism Enterprises,” in this series.

“ We clean up enough to be safe, but not enough to hide what we do. It’s important to show people what real farming is.”

— Scout Proft, Someday Farm, East Dorset, VT



STONE BARNS CENTER
FOR FOOD & AGRICULTURE

Self-Guided Tour



Self-Guided Tours

Visitors who plan to self-guide around the property may wish to download and print one of our 30-minute walking tours of the farm. Copies of these tours are also available in the Visitor Center. Click on the following links to download a tour before your visit:

Farm to Frittata: Discover the farm on this journey from fields, greenhouse and pasture to plate. Using the recipe for frittata and simple salad as a guide, visit the main ingredients and learn about their sustainable Stone Barns Center origins.

Livestock Tour: When the grass is growing from May through November, most of our animals are grass-fed and maintained in a rotational grazing system. In this system, the farmers move the animals to fresh grass daily and the animals spend their days foraging and grazing for food and exploring the environment. This tour teaches you about our animals and how they spend their days on the farm.

Budgeting for Tours

Revenues from tours can be unpredictable, but costs will be relatively fixed. Consider these steps when exploring the financial implications of offering tours:

1. Determine your goals. Are tours to generate income? Market your product?
2. Develop a projected budget.
3. Consider your costs and expenses
 - *Income:* Registration cost + income from farm stand purchases

- *Expenses:* Value of products sampled + advertising + time coordinating tour (answering emails, phone calls, setting up registration systems) + time leading the tour + other costs (depreciation of farm buildings, driveways, septic)
 - Put a dollar figure on the amount of time you will be committing to the tour, and let that determine the minimum number of people you want to have signed up before you run each tour.
4. Consider using break-even analysis to determine what to charge in order to cover the fixed and variable costs associated with offering tours (see table below).
 5. Determine what to charge. Look at what other attractions in the area are charging for tours or

Break-Even Analysis

A break-even point is how much of a product you need to sell to break even. It is calculated using this formula:

$$\text{Break-even POINT} = \frac{\text{Total Fixed Costs}}{(\text{Price} - \text{Variable Costs})}$$

A break-even price can also be calculated for a specific number of product sales:

$$\text{Break-even PRICE} = \frac{(\text{Total Fixed Costs} / \text{Number of Units to be Sold}) + \text{Variable Costs}}$$

Consider a farmer evaluating how many one-hour farm tours she would need to host in order to break even on investments in farm infrastructure totalling \$4,000 in *fixed costs* (costs that don't vary with the number of tour visitors; see table at right). She estimates each tour will incur \$80 in *variable costs*. Based on the break-even analysis, if the farmer charges \$100 for each tour, she would need to offer 200 tours to break even on her infrastructure investments.

Now the farmer needs to ask herself some questions: Are 200 tours feasible? Does that match her expectations in terms of time commitment? If she raised the tour price to \$150, how many tours would she need to give to break even? (Answer: 58) Would this higher price be acceptable to consumers? Would it be competitive with other farm tours offered in her market area?

Break-even analysis allows you to examine alternative "what if" scenarios to determine tradeoffs between various price points and the number of product units that need to be sold to achieve a desired financial return.

EXAMPLE: How many one-hour farm tours do I need to offer in order to break even on my investments in farm infrastructure?

Item	Value
Fixed Costs	
Insurance	\$1,000
Improvements to Parking Area	\$1,000
Improvements to Farm Market	\$1,500
Child Play Area	\$500
TOTAL FIXED COSTS (TFC)	\$4,000
Variable Costs	
Wages (3 workers @\$11.67/hour)	\$35
Desired Proprietor Income	\$40
Give-Aways	\$5
TOTAL VARIABLE COSTS (VC)	\$80
Price Charged per Tour (P)	\$100
Break Even Point = TFC/(P-VC) or \$4,000/(\$100-\$80)	200 farm tours

admission (see below). Know your cost of production, which, in the case of a tour, is mostly the tour leader's time and any product for sampling. If your products are easy for customers to purchase, you may be able to charge less than if you are giving an educational tour and aren't expecting people to buy anything. Charging for tours is less risky than offering free or low-cost tours and hoping customers will buy product. One strategy for encouraging sales is to give guests a coupon to use in your farmstand or a discount code for an online purchase.

6. Pilot the tours and correct inaccuracies in budget.
7. Adapt and adjust. Knowing what you do now, assess whether tours fit into your business plan and farm mission.

“ When someone calls and asks the cost for a tour we tell them its free until they find some of our products that they can't live without. When a visitor comes, you can never tell whether they will buy \$1 worth of goods or \$150, so you must be very careful to treat all guests completely the same.”

— Betsy Luce, Sugarbush Farm, Pomfret, VT

Tour Pricing

- Appleton Farms, Hamilton/Ipswich, MA
Mini-Moos tour: \$15/Adult + Child Pair
- Avena Botanicals, Rockport, ME
Guided herbalism tour: \$7/person
- Big Picture Farm, Townshend, VT
Farm tour and goat hang out: \$10/person
- Billings Farm and Museum, Woodstock, VT
Tour: \$16/person
- La Ferme Quinn, Notre-Dame-de-l'Île-Perrot, Quebec, Canada
Farm tour & strawberry PYO: \$12.95/person
- Shelburne Farms, Shelburne, VT
Sun to Cheese Tour (includes a block of cheddar)
\$20/person

Cowgirl Creamery



Cowgirl Creamery offers tastings at their shop in Pt. Reyes, CA and their factory in Petaluma.

Cowgirl Creamery is a San Francisco Bay-area cheese maker that offers tours of their production creamery in Petaluma and their former creamery (now a shop) in Pt. Reyes Station.

The Pt. Reyes tour, marketed as a “guided tasting,” is offered at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. every Friday. The \$5/person fee confirms each guest's reservation and allows the business to collect guest information. Guests purchase cheese and other items from the shop at the end of the one-hour tour, which consistently sells out.

Because Cowgirl Creamery offers online mail order, customers can add tours to their online shopping cart, or register by calling the creamery. Guests are also offered discounts on mail-order cheese for a limited time after they have taken the tour. Vivian Straus, Cowgirl Creamery's public relations coordinator, credits their participation in the California Cheese Trail map for their heavy visitor traffic. The maps are available at the Visitors Bureaus, California Welcome Centers, hotels, wineries and some companies.

Getting the Word Out

SIGN-UPS

You can collect sign-ups by email or phone, or use

an online tool such as [Eventbrite](#), [BrownPaperTickets](#), or [AirBnB](#). Another option is to partner with a business that has a vested interest in its customers having an on-farm experience, and might manage registration for you. If your farm has online sales, you can add a tour as an item customers can put in their cart.



PARTNERSHIPS

Does your product go hand in hand with something available at another business? Maybe your farm's butter is used in a nearby bakery, and the bakery can help advertise your farm tours, or you're located down the road from a popular bed-and-breakfast that could send guests your way. Consider partnering with tour operators, wellness stores, wellness instructors, food markets, slow food groups, and farmer-education initiatives. Partnering with neighboring businesses gives you access to a broader market of potential customers. Whether they hear about you from another business or find you on their own, make sure your website is up to date with photos and/or videos that give a sneak peek of what guests will see when they arrive.

“ There are a couple of inns that send customers our way, not really formal partnerships, but we reach out to a good cross section of inns each year with info, reminding them that we are a fun place for their folks to visit. We'll do this again and include special 'discount' cards for folks who come visit to use at our store.”

— Judith Irving, Fat Toad Farm, Brookfield, VT

Safety

As far as agritourism activities go, farm tours are pretty safe, but it's always important to have appropriate insurance coverage. Your insurer will probably suggest that you have not only premise liability (covers the farm in the event of accident or physical injury to a visitor) and product liability (provides coverage against injury or illness resulting from ingesting farm products), but “commercial general liability,” which combines liability insurance with property insurance.



(Rutgers Cooperative Extension)

USING A TRACTOR FOR HAY OR WAGON RIDES

Always use a tractor that has appropriate power, weight, traction, and breaking ability, and do a service check before taking passengers on board.

- Check tires, fuel, oil, draw bars, lights, brakes, and hitch pins.
- Make sure the wagon has no loose boards, screws, or splinters.
- Consider the use of a safety chain connecting the front axle of the wagon to the tractor.
- Make sure all tractors have proper lighting and markers. Slow moving vehicle emblems and appropriate lighting should be provided for both tractors and wagons. Warning lights on tractors can help increase visibility and provide protection from motorists. This is essential if on-road travel is necessary.

Questions to Answer Before the Tour

- What is the weather for the day?
- Do you have enough sheltered space to go ahead with the visit in inclement weather or will you cancel? Postpone and reschedule?
- Is your farm visible from the road and clearly marked?
- Will cars/buses know where to turn in and park?
- Is parking area clear of equipment and well marked?
- Have you roped off and labeled dangerous areas where you don't want foot or car traffic (manure pit, machine area, pond, equipment)?
- Will everyone be able to get around the farm?
- Do you know of any visitors who may have mobility limitations, and have you planned accordingly?
- Will visitors have access to a bathroom, or will they be expected to use the woods?
- Can your bathroom handle all the visitors, or will you rent a Port-O-Let?
- Do the bathrooms have toilet paper?
- Is there anywhere to wash hands besides the bathroom?
- Are there signs on the doors of your home to indicate that it is private property?
- Do you want a "pack it in, pack it out" policy? If not, where will visitors put their trash during the visit?
- Did you factor the cost of garbage disposal into your group fee?
- Is the boot wash station ready?
- Are dogs in the house? The bull in back pasture? Is the grumpy rooster locked up?
- Is the first-aid kit out and ready?
- Are emergency numbers posted by the phone?
- Are keys out of tractor?
- Are there signs on electric fences, and/or are the fences turned off?
- Are all fertilizers, pest-control products, and medicines out of reach?
- Do you have name tags or masking tape and pens?
- Are signs and map ready?
- Are your guest book and take home materials ready (business cards, mailing lists, order forms, etc.)?

- When using a public road, use escort vehicles with flashers to lead and follow the hay wagon to warn traffic. All tractors should also be equipped with a fire extinguisher, flashlight, first-aid kit, and communication equipment.
- Ensure that equipment guards are in place and properly chained, lubricated, and free from defects.

Never use more than one wagon per tractor. The use of multiple wagons can lead to "snaking," which can cause sideswiping or even overturn wagons. Loading and unloading areas should be as flat as possible, with a clear field of view to reduce the possibility of passengers jumping in front of moving wagons. The loading and unloading platform should be designed to allow visitors to load and unload quickly, easily, and safely. Employees should be stationed to assist participants when loading and unloading the wagons. Training is essential for all staff involved in the operation of the hayride.

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensures that persons with disabilities are afforded equal opportunity in employment, transportation, commercial facilities, and accommodation in public places. Businesses are required to comply. If a farm offers events open to the public, the farm may need provide access for disabled individuals. For example, a person in a wheelchair may not be able to roll from the parking lot to the site if the ground is deeply rutted. If more accessible routes can be easily installed, the law may require it. The ADA does not require that every individual feature be fully accessible, and it does not require that business owners completely remodel at great expense. Exactly what a farm should do to satisfy the ADA depends on when the farm began operations, the nature of the event, and the cost of retrofitting facilities.

At a minimum, farmers should check to see that folks in wheelchairs are not prevented from attending the event or using a restroom. Installing smooth, wide pathways accomplishes this goal. (This is also good practice to avoid injuries to people who are not disabled.) Farms should also consider renting at least one handicapped accessible restroom facility.

To avoid ADA issues, farmers might do some extra research to see what else may be required.

Chances are, you already know everything you need to know in order to craft a fun, interesting farm tour. The challenge lies in developing a budget, marketing the tour, and finding the time to make your farm visitor-ready. Think outside the box about creative partnerships that could draw in additional customers, and as always, have fun! Your farm, family, and market are always changing, so make a plan for evaluating your tours regularly and adjust as needed. This flexibility will bring resilience to your business and is critical for helping your farm reach its overall goals.

Also in this series:

How To...

- Host Dinners on Your Farm
- Host Summer Camp on Your Farm
- Develop a Far Stand
- Develop a Farm Stay
- Develop a Farm Tour
- Develop a Pick-Your-Own Business

A Guide to Successful Agritourism Enterprises

Download at uvm.edu/vtagritourism



REFERENCES: "Organizing Your Farm Tour" and "Questions to Answer Before the Tour" based on VT FEED, "[A Guide to Connecting Farms to Schools and Communities](#)" and Farming and Countryside Education. Break Even Analysis from Rutgers Cooperative Extension, "Financial Management: Budgeting and Pricing for Agritourism" module, 2014. Using a Tractor for Hay or Wagon Rides from Rutgers Cooperative Extension, "Keeping Passengers Safe on Hay Rides," 2014. Americans with Disabilities Act information from Rachel Armstrong, "Hosting Safer and More Legally Secure On-Farm Events." Farm Commons, 2013.

The information contained in this publication is deemed correct and accurate and is based on research at the time of writing. This publication is for educational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or an interpretation of the law. It is recommended that you consult an attorney about specific legal concerns.

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