

Host Weddings on Your Farm

AGRITOURISM BEST PRACTICES SERIES

For farmers, weddings can provide opportunities to diversify the business with something other than an agricultural product. For many farms, the land, vistas, and outbuildings make weddings a natural fit. For others, entering the wedding industry brings new, sometimes insurmountable challenges. This chapter is intended to outline tips and essential steps for opening your farm as a wedding venue.

Are Weddings Right for Your Farm?

Hosting even one wedding each summer is a large commitment involving time, communication, and significant attention to detail about the safety and the attractiveness of your farm. Before you decide to jump in, start by asking yourself – and everyone else involved in your farm business – a few questions.

- Do you enjoy sharing your property with guests?
- What will be the cost of the physical modifications (roads, buildings, landscaping) associated with creating a safe, attractive atmosphere?
- Can you manage the additional business responsibilities associated with the wedding business (including marketing, employee management, and client relations)?
- Are you willing to create the ideal experience for your clients?



Stoneover Farm, Lenox, MA. (Orchard Cove Photography)

“ Farms offer great conversation pieces—like the chickens that cluck at cocktail hour.”

— Olga Moriarty, Pollination Event Company, Lincoln, VT



Orchard Cove Photography

HOW WILL WEDDINGS IMPACT YOUR FARM?

Hosting weddings on the farm may change how you go about your days.

As a farmer, you're always planning your next step. When you take on wedding clients, your next step may revolve around their experience as much as your own farm's cycles. You may choose to spread manure later than usual, leave the sheep in full fleece an extra week, or keep the cows indoors so there aren't any muddy sections of pasture before the event. In general, you may need to spend more time landscaping and keeping your space tidy.

“ We usually shear our sheep in September, but we had to delay shearing until after the wedding so that the animals would have their beautiful, long fleeces on the wedding day.”

— Diversified farmer, Chittenden County

Isham Family Farm



Mike Isham of Isham Family Farm in Williston, VT milked cows as a child in the barn he currently rents for weddings and events. “I knew I needed to do something different with the barn. I didn't want to lose it on my watch. It's got a lot of history in it,” Isham told the *Burlington Free Press* in 2013. For Isham, the barn is becoming a predictable stream of income for his farm, as weather becomes more and more unpredictable.

You'll also need to spend significant time communicating with prospective clients. In addition to asking questions over email and by phone, couples will need to see the venue at least once before making the decision to rent it. You'll need to allocate time for these site visits and be clear with the couple about how much time you can give them.

Hosting weddings may also have impacts beyond your property lines. Communicating adequately with neighbors could make or break your success as a wedding venue. Spend the time to help neighbors set appropriate expectations. Clarify with them about when music will be shut off, where guests will park, and how many events you plan to host each year.

Don't be shy! Call or visit other farms that host weddings to begin learning what is involved. Ask the advice of a wedding planner, too.

Bliss Ridge Farm



(JC McIlwaine)

Bliss Ridge Farm in Moretown, Vermont, sets itself apart by noting its small size, attention to detail, and unmatched location.

“Bliss Ridge is a boutique wedding venue booking no more than 10 unforgettable events per year. Our mission is to facilitate custom weddings and the unique character of our 88-acre, organic, wilderness-surrounded farm, provides a stunning backdrop for events ranging in style from elegant seven course gastronomic affairs for 200, to intimate elopements, to relaxed pig roast-square dances.”

What Do Clients Look for in Wedding Venues?

Many wedding clients look for the following services, characteristics, and amenities in a farm wedding:

- Clean and safe space. No mud, dust, or manure where people will walk, sit, or rest. No animal smells or flies.
- Fresh, local, and amazing food.
- A real farm experience: the opportunity to milk a cow, move the sheep, collect the eggs, stack the wood (even if they don't take you up on the offer).
- Comfortable, clean, flushing bathrooms. If they are portable toilets, choose the luxury line.
- Very good customer service and clear communication (which might be where a hired planner comes into service).
- A beautiful outdoor ceremony site within a 5- to 10-minute walk to parking, and with a car drop-off spot for elderly and/or disabled individuals.
- Parking that doesn't become muddy.
- A good rain plan for the ceremony.
- Nice mowed fields, lawns. Flowers, fruit trees, arbors, pathways, attractive fencing, etc.
- Floors that are level, finished, and good for dancing.
- A private experience. Little road noise or road exposure.
- On-site prep space for bridal party with good light. Should be cozy, clean, comfy, and nice for photos, with a nice bathroom and floor-length mirror.
- Nice accommodations for guests within 20 minutes (30 minutes max). Rental houses are a good option, too.
- Close proximity to airport.
- On-site help available for set up, but clients given freedom to do as they'd like.
- Nice barn/tent lighting. Bistro lights — a step up from Christmas lights — are very popular.
- Lack of noise ordinances and curfews so the band can play until 12:30 a.m.
- Commercial kitchen space to avoid renting equipment for a field kitchen.



The Inn at Round Barn Farm, Waitsfield, VT. (Orchard Cove Photography)

“ In the wedding world, it’s all about referrals. Caterers, tent and rental companies, photographers, florists, bar service, and *planners* are great sources of business for you. Once established, you should make visits to as many of these vendors as possible to meet them, offer info about your space, and invite them to take a tour!”

— Olga Moriarty, Pollination Event Company

A “Green Wedding” Farm

On its website, the Monitor Barn in Richmond, VT, shares the many ways that it is a Green Wedding Venue:

- “Solar Orchard” comprised of 14 solar trackers
- Composting on-site
- Low-water restroom facilities
- Located on 200 acres of conserved land
- Restored historic (1903) facility
- Organic flowers, produce, and pasture-raised poultry available for sale

- Rentals included: consider tables (farm tables are gorgeous), chairs (even simply white folding chairs for ceremonies), tents, vases, mason jars, votive candles, tiki torches, wishing lanterns, directional signs. Avoid dishes, glasses, and cutlery (you’ll never get it as clean as the rental companies).

No venue will have all of these attributes, but having as many as possible will increase your desirability as a venue. As your business grows, you can add more of these features.

YOUR REPUTATION AS A VENUE

When committing to a venue, a couple will look for a business that is trustworthy and organized. It will be paramount that you have a detailed contract with the couple that outlines the guidelines for renting the space (see p. 6), and that you offer timely, professional responses to their many questions.

Marketing Your Venue

The wedding venue market is competitive, but honestly distinguishing your farm could give you a competitive advantage. Communicate clearly about what you offer, and when you develop an enterprise budget for the wedding portion of your business, be sure to include the costs of marketing your venue.

Thinking about the types of clients you are trying to attract can help you focus your marketing efforts. Is your ideal client in-state or out-of-state? What is their intended budget and party size? Are you trying to attract those seeking a state-of-the-art facility, an eco-friendly venue option, or a rustic setting?

Photography

Quality photos or video showing the farm, venue, and details—as well as photos from past weddings—help potential clients to imagine their event and understand your space.

On your wedding contract, ask clients to grant permission for you to use their wedding photos for future marketing. Most couples will be happy to do so.

“ Test the waters by hosting rehearsal dinners and foodie events under tents. Rent your home, offer public tours, sign on to be a bike tour destination. Offer to host a wedding for free. Yes, for free! Offer to host for someone you know and trust. Ask them what they’d like to have in a wedding venue, and try to make some of it come true. The experience of having a wedding on your property will provide you with loads of helpful information that will assist in your planning.”

— Olga Moriarty, Pollination Event Company

“ Farm venues make it very easy to incorporate natural elements into your theme and décor because they help maintain the essence of the land. Things like walkways (instead of man-made sidewalks or tent pads), ponds and rolling pastures provide a striking balance to one another and give you the opportunity to spotlight the beautiful countryside as a primary element of your big day.”

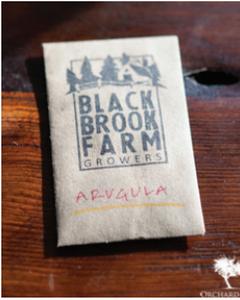
— Green Bride Guide, May 2014

COMMUNICATE WHAT YOU OFFER

At a basic level, your farm website and promotional materials should include information about the venue.

- A rate sheet describing what is provided at each price point, including what decorations are provided by the farm and client.
- A floor plan of the rental space, or a map of the venue including the location for a tent, parking, ceremony, reception, portable toilets, photoshoot, etc.
- Detailed descriptions of the grounds and rental space. These may include dimensions of the important areas such as rest rooms, dance floor, porch, patio, catering tent, kitchen, bar, seating area, and dressing rooms.
- The number of guests your venue can accommodate.
- Location of nearby lodging facilities.
- Availability of venue by season.
- Wheelchair accessibility.
- Other attractions and points of interest near the farm, including swimming holes, golf courses, and hiking trails.
- Unique characteristics of your land (e.g., mountains you can see, types of trees you have, conservation easements).
- Your overall farm goals and how hosting weddings contributes to them.
- Any eco-friendly practices or infrastructure.
- Information on booking a tour of the venue.
- Statement indicating how far in advance reservations must be made.
- Required deposit for holding the venue.
- List of preferred vendors (caterers, officiants, musicians, invitation printers, linen, tent and table rentals, photography and videography, wedding planners, flowers, hair styling, transportation, bar services, valet parking, lighting/electrical).
- List of exclusive vendors (this means the client must use that specific vendor). An exclusive list of caterers may be useful, so you can be assured the caterer will purchase food from your farm.
- Availability of any “add ons”: wagon rides, flower arranging, llama walks, wedding favors, signage, etc.
- The story of your farm. Share the unique attributes that set you apart from other venues, and make sure clients understand the type of business they are supporting when they select your venue.

Share Your Story



Weddings generally are more recreational than educational agritourism, but there are simple ways to share a bit of your story. Consider displaying large photographs of your farm or a timeline of its history, and use farm products for decorations and wedding favors.

Perhaps offer a wagon ride to the ceremony, tours of the farm, or an area for taking photos that displays your farm name in view of your barn or animals. If you ship products, make sure you have order forms or business cards out for guests.

At their farm wedding in Carlisle, MA, CSA famers Gallagher and David gave guests seeds for their gardens. (Orchard Cove Photography)

“ Many farms are great for rehearsal dinners. Couples can do the classic Vermont-y thing at a farm on the Friday before the wedding, then the more high-pressure event at a wedding facility.”

— Corie Pierce, Bread and Butter Farm, Shelburne, VT

Just because you state in writing what you offer, don't assume your customers will understand exactly what you can or cannot provide. Corie Pierce of Bread and Butter Farm in Shelburne, VT shows prospective clients photos of the flowers she can provide and lets them compare the selections to those a florist might provide. “I really push them to understand what I can do and what our farm can provide. I ask them to really think forward to their wedding day. Will this pavilion work? Will they be happy with this bridal suite? There's a lot at stake, and sometimes couples start off very laid-back, but they get pressure from friends and family to do things in more high-end ways as the wedding day approaches.”

Building a Contract

Some wedding venues are inclusive: they take care of booking entertainment, flowers, spa treatments for the couple, food, and more. Others rent a physical space, and the couple or wedding planner coordinates the rest. Many fall somewhere in between, such as Bliss Ridge Farm in Moretown, VT which offers hand-painted signage, wooden tables, and chairs to go along with their barn venue, and provides a list of preferred vendors for portable toilets, caterers, bartenders, etc.

An attorney will be able to help you build a legal rental agreement. Important elements include:



Grand View Winery, Calais, VT.

- Hours and date of event
- Fees (rental fee, cleaning fee, deposit, and payment due dates)
- Cancellation policy
- Expectations of the conditions of the premises
- Restrictions (prohibited areas of farm, types of confetti or decorations)
- Alcohol policies (caterers must have appropriate licensure and guest's sobriety is responsibility of the renters)
- Special event insurance
- Holds harmless clause
- Agreement to comply with laws
- Right to revoke the agreement
- Parking limitations
- Curfews
- Expectations of what client must rent (e.g., portable toilets)

Your contract should be signed by the parties paying the rental fee. In many cases, these are the parents of the couple, and the couple being married is the beneficiary of the contract. (SOURCE: Rachel Brenke, The Law Tog)

“ Be very clear about why a deposit is needed, when it’s due, and when the full payment is due. When a couple puts down a deposit, it means we are turning away other people who may approach us about hosting an event on that day. People don’t always understand that, or the fact that even with the deposit, if they cancel, we are still losing money on the transaction based on all of the time we put into working with them.”

— Corie Pierce, Bread and Butter Farm, Shelburne, VT

What to Charge?

The cost of your venue will depend greatly on what’s included and the duration of the rental. When determining pricing, make sure you understand and account for the full costs of operating your venue. Conduct a break-even analysis to determine how many weddings per year you would need to host in order to break even, and don’t be afraid to charge a fair price for what the venue is worth. Research what your target clientele is accustomed to paying, understand the market landscape around you, and look at your competitors’ pricing, and trade publications. Estimate the amount of time you spend talking to clients, and account for this in your price.

\$1,500 for a barn and adjacent outdoor sites, with electric power and 24 hours of access. Food, flowers and limited accommodations are an additional cost. Capacity: 100.

\$3,000 for a field with parking, parking attendants, trash disposal, benches and a vendor list. Flowers grown on the farm at an extra charge. Tent, tables and chairs, food and beverage, insurance, and toilets are all the responsibility of the customer. Capacity: 250.

\$3,000 for a lawn with a tent and labor to put it up and take it down, lights and electric service. Beverage service and lodging are an extra charge. Customer is responsible for heaters, tables, chairs, dance floor, catering and all tableware. Capacity: 200.

\$6,500 for barn and grounds, parking for 80 cars, catering kitchen, bathrooms, tables, chairs, one on-call staff person, 48 hours access. Vegetables and flowers for an extra charge. Tent, catering, and insurance are the responsibility of the customer. Capacity: 200.

\$5,000 to \$8,000 for barn, meadow, bathrooms, dance floor, some tables and chairs, parking attendants and assistance with setup and cleanup. Lodging available for an extra charge. Catering, flowers, additional tables and chairs, and tents are the responsibility of the customer. Capacity: 150.

Source: Summary Results of a Survey of Vermont Farms Hosting Weddings. Compiled by Becky Bartlett and Lisa Chase for UVM Extension, 2019

Planning the Event

Many clients will be do-it-yourself types who are planning their wedding on their own. Others will work with a wedding planner to keep track of the details. However, even when your farm is only responsible for the space rental and the client does the rest, there are a few planning items that will fall onto your list.

“ Do your due diligence to be as helpful as possible with your clients’ planning process and questions. As an example, create a preferred vendor contact list: caterers, transportation, bar services, etc. All of these vendors are crucial contacts for clients. If you have a list of people who you trust in your facility, your business will run smoothly and your clients’ events will be seamless.”

— Grace Ciffo, Event Planner/ Venue Host Prindle Barn, Hinesburg, VT

Be Clear about Your Time

Don't be afraid to tell your clients how much time you can allocate to their questions and needs. Set boundaries early in the planning process, and if they demand more from you, tactfully provide them with a list of recommended wedding planners they can hire.

FOOD AND ALCOHOL

If there's one thing all great celebrations have in common, it's good food! The food served at a wedding is an opportunity for you to tie your farm's story together with their event. Whether you produce maple, meat, veggies, or flowers, consider offering these products to the client. Most couples will be interested in hiring caterers; you can encourage the caterer to use your farm's products. You can also have an exclusive contract with a caterer who you know will purchase what you have available. Some venues allow clients to hold a potluck or cook themselves.

The caterer or bar service must hold a liquor license. Your insurance company will need to know if the caterer is serving alcohol on your property.



Wedding ceremony site at Amee Farm, Pittsfield, VT. (Birke Photography)

SAFETY AND LIABILITY

There are many ways to help legally protect your business, including setting it up with the appropriate legal structure; using waivers, signage, and adequate lighting; setting clear rules for guests; taking medical trainings; maintaining a clean environment; keeping records; complying with codes; and of course, having an adequate insurance policy.

Farmers should ensure that illness from bacterial contamination is covered under their insurance policy. For farm weddings, farms can often get an event endorsement or rider, or a commercial policy to boost coverage.

It is commonplace for a venue to require clients and wedding vendors to provide a liability insurance plan of \$1,000,000, in which the farm is listed as co-insured. This usually entails a fee of around \$850. Make sure this insurance is purchased well in advance of the event. Check wedsafe.com for liability insurance quotes.

“ Never skimp on your electrical capacities. The worst thing you can do is allow an event to go dark. If you do nothing else, invest in good electrical infrastructure so that clients can add cooking equipment, custom lighting, or a large band to your venue without tripping out the power.”

— Grace Ciffo, Event Planner/ Venue Host, Prindle Barn, Hinesburg, VT

ZONING

Remember to check zoning bylaws before marketing your farm for weddings. Many towns do not include “events” in their definition of “agriculture,” but farmers can seek a “conditional use permit,” which would make exceptions to the zoning bylaws. Farmers can also talk to neighbors and community members to assess their concerns before approaching zoning officials. Rachel Armstrong, attorney and founder of Farm Commons, suggests that it’s wise to speak with an attorney before asking for a variance or advocating for changes to the bylaws.

Bread and Butter Farm



Bread and Butter Farm in Shelburne, VT has hosted a limited number of weddings and several events for parties of varying sizes. For events that include dinner grown and prepared on the farm, pricing is generally \$38–\$45 per person, with a minimum fee of \$2,500, or a site fee of \$200 per hour. Included in this price are an outdoor pavilion, use of places, tables, a sound system for the band, restrooms, parking, and private space for wedding parties or small groups to use as a retreat during the event.

TENT SITE AND DETAILS

A flat and dry area is important for the tent site. If you cannot avoid a wet area, try to improve it by spreading hay or (ideally) straw under the tent and packing it down by stomping all over the area. This creates a brick-like floor covering. For the tent itself, clients may have the option to rent sidewalls, which block wind, protect from intense sun and/or rain, and limit mosquitos during the evening. When planning for the size of a tent, factor about 20 sq. feet per person, which will allow space for dining, dancing, a buffet, and a band or DJ.

Christmas lights will not sufficiently illuminate a tent at night. Clients will need to rent lights with larger bulbs and higher wattage to truly light the tent when darkness falls.

“ Remember there are no ‘perfect’ weddings. ‘Perfect’ events do not exist. What you can offer is a location for events full of love, beauty, joy, wonder, grace—that is what you should strive for. Do not promise perfection. Do not overstate what your land or barn can offer. Rain happens. Cakes fall. Plan in advance, troubleshoot last-minute snafus, and keep a sense of humor at all times!”

— Grace Ciffo, Event Planner/ Venue Host Prindle Barn, Hinesburg, VT

Many farms are perfectly positioned to tap into the growing interest in green, rustic, or quaint weddings. Hosting these special events is not a decision to be taken lightly, but weddings do pose a significant opportunity to diversify your business, employ community members, and, in some cases, share the story of your farm with guests from around the world. Your farm, family, and market are always changing, so make a plan for evaluating your wedding offerings regularly and adjust as needed. This flexibility will bring resilience to your business and is critical for helping your farm reach its overall goals.

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- Develop a Farm Stand
- Develop a Farm Stay
- Develop a Pick-Your-Own Business
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REFERENCES: “Are Weddings Right for Your Farm” adapted from “Is An Agritourism Venture Right for Your Farm,” Rutgers University Fact Sheet, 2010. “What Do Clients Look for in a Wedding Venue?” provided by Olga Moriarty, Pollination Event Company. “Safety and Liability” from Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture. “Tent Site, Decorations and Details” provided by Grace Ciffo, Prindle Barn, Hinesburg, VT.

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