

INTRODUCTION

A pick-your-own operation is a farm where customers may go to pick, cut or choose their own product out of the field. Also called u-pick, cut-your-own or choose-your-own, this type of enterprise is a frequent direct marketing channel choice for farms growing berries, tree fruit, pumpkins and Christmas trees. Other crops such as beans and flowers may also be offered through this method.

Pick-your-own (PYO) formally emerged in the United States when prices for some fruit and vegetable crops hit low levels in the 1930s and 1940s.¹ Prices for some crops failed to cover the cost of harvest labor and containers, prompting some producers to allow customers to come to the fields to pick their own product for purchase. An increase in “rural recreation,” as people drove to the countryside from the cities for leisure, also influenced the popularity of PYO marketing.

From U-Pick orchards to school farm tours where students chose their own pumpkins, PYOs played a prominent part in the growth of agritourism beginning in the 1960s and continues to do so today. PYO operations have recently benefited from food industry trends including 1) consumers seeking a greater sense of connection to their food; and 2) perception of self-harvested crops as affordable and high-quality.

Advantages of PYO operations for farmers include the reduced need for product harvest and handling labor, lower equipment costs, the opportunity for larger transactions per customer and the potential to sell lower-quality products. Disadvantages may include the need for an excellent location or superior advertising, liability and other risks of having customers on the farm, the need for customer supervision and the potential for crop damage from improper harvesting.

Farmers interested in starting a PYO operation should carefully analyze their potential in such a venture based on their particular resources and market situation. Producers who decide to move forward with a PYO should spend time planning for the management and operation of the enterprise by developing thorough written business and marketing plans. This publication provides information that may be helpful to farmers considering the development of a PYO operation and issues that should be addressed in written plans. Topics discussed in this publication include:

- » Characteristics of Common PYO Crops
- » Examples of PYO Operations in Tennessee
- » Is a PYO a Good Marketing Channel Choice?
- » PYO Planning and Operation
- » Additional Resources

¹Lloyd, Renee, Daniel S. Tilley, James R. Nelson. “Should I Grow Fruits and Vegetables? Pick Your Own Markets.” <http://ag.arizona.edu/AREC/pubs/dmkt/Upick-ShouldIgrow.pdf>

PYO PLANNING AND OPERATION

If producers determine a PYO may be a potentially successful marketing channel for them, it is important that they develop a thorough plan for how to operate the venture. Planning and operating a PYO is not a simple task, as multiple aspects must be considered. When planning for a PYO, producers should 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 to market through 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

COMPLEMENTARY PRODUCTS, ATTRACTIONS OR MARKET CHANNELS

PYO marketing may provide a foundation for potential 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. Listening to customer or staff recommendations will often give producers ideas on what to consider adding to the farm.

PYO operations often have an on-farm retail market with some pre-picked product for sale for customers who do not have the time, ability or desire to pick their own product. Value-added products, such as jams and other preserves, are methods to utilize surplus or lower-quality fruit and add products to the mix in the retail market. Complementary products such as pumpkin carving kits, Christmas tree stands or additional 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.

School tours are also conducted at many PYO farms. Pumpkin farms, fruit farms and Christmas tree farms are all popular school tour destinations. Producers will need to consider their availability during the school day, how to address potential liability concerns, and consider how tours might affect their existing business both positively and negatively. School tours may be helpful in promoting the PYO operation as well. Producers could send information with teachers to give students to take home.

Adding complementary products and services may involve additional regulations. For example, producers with concession stands selling products other than pre-packaged items will need to work with their local county 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 work with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, Regulatory Services, Food and Dairy staff to obtain the appropriate food manufacturing certification, inspection and/or permit. Sales of products other than those raised and sold by the farmer may require the operator to collect and remit sales tax.

OPERATION LAYOUT/DESIGN

The layout or design of the operation can greatly enhance or detract from a PYO experience for both the customer and the operator. An effective layout will decrease confusion and frustration. It will also enhance the experience of customers with the ambiance and cleanliness of the operation.

Factors that producers should consider in laying out the design of the operation may include:

- » Types and number of expected vehicles entering and exiting the operation
- » Number of expected customers and characteristics that may impact operation and facility design
- » Adequate space and effective flow of vehicle and pedestrian traffic in the parking lot
- » Flow of customers among parking lot, customer check-in, picking containers, fields, retail sales area, checkout, etc.
- » Distance from parking lot to customer check-in and farthest picking areas
- » Placement of restroom facilities
- » Placement of concession facilities
- » Farm traffic flow such as hayrides or other vehicles carrying customers to and from the fields or other areas of the farm, vehicles transporting product or conducting other farm facilities

- » Areas where customers should not go such as farm equipment or supply storage areas and places where other safety concerns may exist
- » Other activities on the farm such as agricultural production or agritourism activities
- » Plans for future expansion

PRODUCTION PLANNING

Whether Christmas trees or berries, pick-your-own crops typically involve long-term establishment periods. Since a perennial crop's location is difficult to change after planting, careful planning and site preparation can help manage headaches later.

Sites for annual or biennial crops, such as pumpkins and strawberries, are more easily adjusted.

These two crops also work well together. Some PYO operators have found that planting pumpkins after strawberry harvest helps create a more constant PYO customer pattern on their farm for a given year.

Producers should always keep the customer perception and experience in mind when planning their PYO enterprise. Extra time or some minor inconveniences taken during planting and site preparation may help a producer more easily manage crowds of customers later.

PARKING AND CUSTOMER FLOW

Parking and customer flow require careful consideration. Parking areas should be clearly marked, and directional signs should be used to guide customers to the proper parking areas. After parking, clearly marked paths should help keep consumers out of incoming traffic. Many PYO farms offer transportation (in golf carts, wagons, etc.) to and from parking or customer check-in areas and fields.

Check-in stations may be used when PYO customers arrive at the farm. At check-in, customers receive containers and instructions on pricing and picking. This may be a single location or, particularly on larger farms, customers may be able to check in at numerous locations. The check-in also gives farm personnel an opportunity to direct consumers to the appropriate PYO location.

Lessons from a Tennessee PYO Operator – Production Planning

One tip offered by PYO operators is to plant early-maturing varieties in places that are natural first stops for customers. While directions from staff, signs and roping off areas not yet to be picked help, customers may still be tempted to pick the first fruit they see.

David Webb learned this when he planted his first blueberries on a hillside. He planted earlier-maturing varieties, Duke, Sierra and Toro, at the top. He planted later-maturing varieties, Nelson and Bluecrop, at the bottom. Pickers heading up the hill are tempted to pick the varieties beginning to mature instead of picking the earlier-maturing varieties at the top. "But I should have planted the earlier-ripening varieties at the bottom of the hill," says Webb. "It's hard to tell customers to go around and up to the top."

Additional Resources available from the University of Tennessee Extension Center for Profitable Agriculture

Agritourism in Focus: A Guide for Tennessee

Farmers <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1754.pdf>

Choosing Direct Marketing Channels for Agricultural

Products <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1796.pdf24>

A General Guide to Pricing for Direct Farm Marketers and Value-Added Agricultural

Entrepreneurs <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1803.pdf>

Liability and Agritourism: Implications of Tennessee's 2009

Legislation <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1787.pdf>

Online Resources Available from Other States

Food Safety Begins on the Farm: A Grower Self-Assessment of Food Safety Risks – U-Pick Operations. <http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/documents/edumat/FSBFEngLOW.pdf>

Lloyd, Renee, Daniel S. Tilley, James R. Nelson. Should I Grow Fruits and Vegetables? Pick Your Own Markets. <http://ag.arizona.edu/AREC/pubs/dmkt/Upick-ShouldIgrow.pdf>

Pick-Your-Own (U-Pick) Marketing. University of Kentucky Crop Diversification and Biofuel Research and Education Center. <http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CDBREC/marketing/pyo.pdf>

Skora, Rose. Pick-Your-Own Operations and Farm Stands—Options for Your Business. University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension A3811-

14. <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/A3811-14.pdf>

Fruit and Vegetable Marketing for Small-Scale and Part-Time Growers. Penn State Ag Alternatives. <http://agalternatives.aers.psu.edu/Publications/MarketingFruitAndVeggie.pdf>

A Farmer's Guide to a Pick-Your-Own-Operation, UT

Extension <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1802.pdf>