

*Getting started with*  
**U-Pick Farming**

MSU Extension  
2018 Beginning Farmer Webinar Series  
April 4, 2018

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**“AND  
JUSTICE  
FOR ALL”**

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Form AD-475-C (REVISED 8/2000)

## A little background on 'pick-your-own' farming

- First documented U.S. U-Pick farming was in NJ and NY orchards in early 1800's
- Most common products: apples (& other tree fruits), strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, pumpkins, Christmas trees, garden vegetables, cabbage
- U-pick peaked in the 1970's.....why?
  - Larger families
  - Full-time homemakers
  - Home canning much more prevalent
- Most ongoing, successful U-picks are a component of a larger 'entertainment-farm' mix



## ‘Resurgence’ of PYO farming

- 1980’s – declining ag commodity prices encourages farmers to seek new markets
- “Agricultural nostalgia” – Americans are more enthusiastic than most other citizenry
- People go to ‘U-Picks’ for a fun, wholesome experience, not just for good prices
- ‘Local food’ movement – people more interested in who produces their food, and how



# Is a ‘pick-your-own’ operation for you?

- Are you a “people person”?
  - 98% of customers are good people to deal with
  - 2% of customers will give you headaches
- What is your current farm business status?
  - Producing but not selling products you intend to direct-market?
  - Already producing and selling it?
  - Neither? Producing and selling need to be addressed separately.
  - Start where you find yourself right now, and be realistic.



# Is a 'pick-your-own' operation for you?

- What kind of market are you aiming for?
  - Niche?
  - Local only?
  - Larger?
- Who are you going to sell to? (do you have alternatives to the PYO market?)
  - Individuals? (least headaches and most profits)
  - Groups?
  - Businesses
  - Retail, wholesale, or both?



# Is a 'pick-your-own' operation for you?

- Are you assuming you have market for your product? Or have you proved your market exists?
  - Are you located close enough to a population center?
  - Is your farm conveniently located or easy to find?
  - Have you talked to lots of people and organizations such as Regional Planning, Chamber of Commerce, etc?
  - Who else in your area is currently selling the same, or similar products
  - Will your farm take away part of another farm's market? Is there enough for both?
  - Can I produce a better product than the competition?



# Is a 'pick-your-own' operation for you?

- Do you have a quality product?
  - Compare your product with the best in the industry, not just your neighbor!
- Do you have a business plan?
  - This is essential if you need to borrow money
  - Be conservative when making the plan
- Do you know your cost of production?
  - How much it costs to produce your product will determine your price and profit margin



## Is a ‘pick-your-own’ operation for you?

- Are you comfortable the concept of “the customer is always right”?
  - Remember, the customer drives the direct marketing business



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- Welcome the public on the farm



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- **Start small and grow with experience and sales**



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- **Utilize season extension**



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- **Train and manage labor**



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- **Manage farm safety and liability risk**



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- **Provide excellent customer service**



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- **Promote the operation effectively**

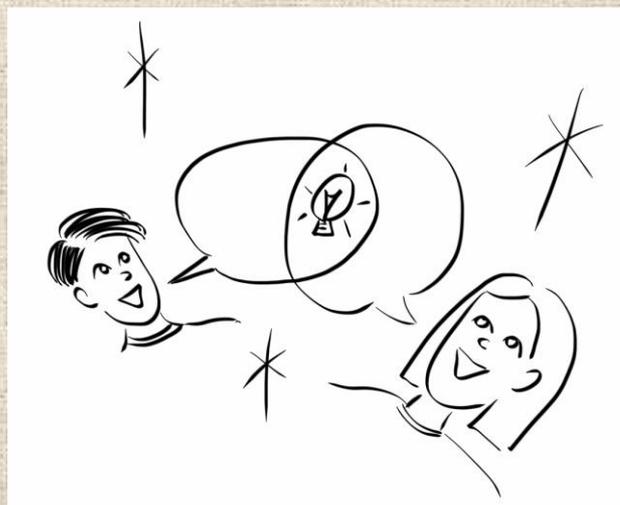


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## • Communicate effectively with customers



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  - Communicate effectively with customers
- **Build relationships and loyalty with customers**



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- **Supervise customers**



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- **Commit to a long-term venture**



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- **Be willing to accept higher levels of crop damage**



# Common characteristics of PYO customers

- NCSU study 2008
  - Motivated by freshness, quality, price, and the experience of visiting the farm
  - Have higher income and education levels than average
  - Travel 20-25 miles from the farm
  - Typical age is 50
  - Visit the farm in groups of 2 or more
  - Frequently bring children

*Characteristics vary between regions. Farmers interested in starting PYO operations should analyze their local market.*



# PYO pros and cons

## Pro

- Reduced labor to harvest crop
- Cash sales
- Lower operating costs
- Lower packaging costs (when customers bring their own)
- Reduced post-harvest tasks (sorting, storage, packing, shipping)
- Opportunity to meet and educate customers
- Greater market recognition
- Customer advantages (cost savings, support local economy, fun & wholesome experience)

## Con

- Farm liability
- Long work hours during harvest
- Weekend work during harvest
- Advertising costs
- Challenging customers
- Unpredictable market
- Unpredictable weather
- Some yield loss
- Poor farm location
- Need to keep farm spic & span
- Market for excess product
- Finding good short-term labor



# What you need to succeed...

*thanks to Steve Fouch, retired MSUE educator*

- Location
- Good growing site
- Market potential
- Mix of fruit
- Appropriate size of operation
- Good production system
- Insect, disease and weed control
- Appropriate equipment
- U-pick supplies
- Advertising

## What else?

- Business plan
- Time
- Available labor
- Insurance
- Food safety plan
- Positive attitude
- Profit



# Comments from a PYO veteran

- Negatives of U-Pick strawberry farm
  - Weather pattern changes
  - Hard to find good, short-term help
  - Start-up costs
  - Irrigation essential
  - Your property is 'open to the public' during picking
  - Insect and weed control
  - Mammal pest control
  - Long, hard workdays
  - Customer load can be overwhelming
  - Customers don't usually follow instructions well
  - Need good luck



# Comments from a PYO veteran

- Positives of U-Pick strawberry farm
  - People pick your crop – free labor
  - Pre-picked orders worked OK if labor available
  - Liability insurance has not been an issue
  - Lots of good, repeat customers
  - “The most fun part of the business was the smiling, laughing and happy customers” – Pete Maki, Trenary, MI



**Agritourism defines the places where agriculture and tourism connect. Anytime a farming operation opens its doors to the public and invites visitors to enjoy their products and services--that's agritourism**

**Michigan Agritourism Association**  
**[www.mifarmfun.com](http://www.mifarmfun.com)**



# Considerations for Agritourism

- Knowledge of staff/customer service
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Concessions
- Marketing
- Zoning/building codes
- Insurance



## **MSUE Agritourism contact:**

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***Thanks!***

**Questions?**

**Comments?**

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