



U-pick Market Success

Americans are ripe for the nostalgia of U-pick farms. Learn what's involved in an operation and how one family succeeds with their "labor of love."

Without a doubt, running a U-pick operation is one of the fastest-growing segments of the small-farm industry.

Each season more and more growers are adjusting their production arrangements in order to offer U-pick as an aspect of their marketing effort.

Many farmers report that running a U-pick operation is often the only way they can get a fair price for their farm products these days.

The key seems to be in making a gracious change between regular farming and U-pick farming. Having lots of visitors around the farm may be quite a bother to a farmer accustomed to having his way around the property.

Although in some cases the financial rewards can be great, operating a U-pick farm shouldn't be undertaken strictly for money, because love of the work seems to be a strong component of all the currently successful operations.

The History of U-pick

U-pick farming is not a completely new phenomena.

In the 19th century a few enterprising Victorian market gardeners near London regularly promoted country outings to their outlying fields, where jaded city dwellers could go and be treated to locally cooked meals and pick bushels of vegetables to take back home. Although organization was probably not anything like what we see in modern roadside fruit stands and U-pick operations today, the basic motivation was the same.

U-pick Case Study

To contact Apple Annie's Orchard Inc.:

2081 W. Hardy Rd.
Willcox, AZ 85643
(520) 384-2084.

Today's city residents and suburbanites, separated from the agricultural activities of their forefathers, find a sort of agricultural nostalgia in picking their own produce.

It's no surprise that families seem to be the majority of U-pick customers, as parents appreciate giving their children the opportunity to experience the pleasures of the farm, even if only for a brief time.

In America, U-pick operations have existed since the early 19th century, when apple growers in New Jersey and New York invited urbanites out to the country for an afternoon of picking and picnicking among the fruit trees.

The activity picked up considerably in the early 1950s when the population boomed; the spread of suburbs around every urban center resulted in farmers taking advantage of their new neighbors' interest.

Roadside fruit stands became a common sight along highways and in the fringes between the cities and the country.

Savvy fruit-stand operators allowed experience-hungry visitors to pick a few fruits and vegetables from their fields out back, which satisfied everyone involved.

More sophisticated operations soon followed, and blackberries, blueberries and strawberries joined apples as the most common U-pick produce.

At the same time, some farmers started a practice of charging thrifty suburban dwellers for access to farm fields after the main harvest was finished. These "gleaners" were able to buy large quantities of produce for very low prices, but the



practice died down in the 1960s, mostly due to liability concerns in an era of high pesticide use. This sort of gleaning became more frequent among non-governmental public support agencies looking to obtain foodstuffs for their impoverished clientele.

The recent boom in U-pick operations started in the 1980s. Declining prices for most agricultural commodities forced many farmers to seek new ways to market their products.

U-picks started springing up like never before, and the happy farmers were not only able to charge more than wholesale bulk prices for their products, but were also able to sell those same retail customers “extras” such as processed foods and rustic souvenirs.

In general, America is a country prime for the U-pick business because it has less agricultural heritage than any other nation.

Almost from the start, a lower percentage of Americans have been involved in agricultural activities than in any other country. In an odd way, this makes Americans more agriculturally nostalgic than any other citizenry, and therefore more enthusiastic about U-pick operations.

Americans go to U-picks not just because the prices are good, but because the experience is fun and wholesome.

The U-pick industry is not entirely on the upswing, however. U-pick activity is declining as busier people are finding less time to pick their own fruits and vegetables. Even with plenty of promotion and professional management, many marginal U-picks are having trouble competing against supermarket chains that offer ever-higher quality and assortment, as well as low prices. Apple Annie's
Deep in southern Arizona, an hour and a half east of Tucson and well west of the New Mexico border, sits the town of Willcox.

This area is traditionally cattle country, and Willcox still hosts a large annual livestock auction that draws bidders from all over the country. Farming, particularly cotton and grain, is also significant here.

Willcox has been diversifying over the past 20 or 30 years, and many orchards, organic vegetable farms, hydroponics operations and oddballs such as ostrich farms have appeared and flourished.

But the key feature of Willcox agriculture today is the thriving U-pick industry that has grown up here.

Dozens of U-pick operations featuring many fruit, nut, berry and vegetable locations can be found within a short drive of each other.

Peach, apple cider and pumpkin festivals bring thousands of visitors every year. Although Phoenix is over 150 miles away, and Tucson is 75, multiple generations of family customers and busloads of schoolchildren have created a southern Arizona tradition of going to Willcox every year to pick their own fruits and vegetables.

Queen of the Willcox U-pick operations is Apple Annie's, an establishment north of town that draws thousands of visitors to its professionally run but family-flavored operation.

Apple trees first planted in 1980 have now grown into the core of a wandering apple, pear and peach orchard that sprawls across the high desert.

Annie, her husband John Holcomb, and his father Don, had never before farmed but they decided to plant the apples “to create a center for the family's activity,” says Don.

When the apples began to bear fruit, it became apparent that another business angle would be needed. Times were tough for all American apple farmers in the mid 1980s and prices were too low to make a profit.

“Earlier apple plantings in our area were losing money, so we wanted to try a different approach,” says John.

The different approach was U-pick, and they've never looked back. The farm sold apple bread and apple cider through Costco in the early years, and still does sell apple bread there, but as the U-pick business grew, it became their main operation.



Within a few years the school tours started, and these days there are school buses lining the parking lot every week.

A well-stocked gift shop offers locally produced apple products, including cider, as well as a variety of other farm edibles, and a Burger Barn restaurant specializes in apple-smoked burgers on the weekends.

One of their key products has always been apple bread, and the farm now boasts its own modern baking facility in which thousands of loaves are produced. Apple pies and apple butter are also produced en masse in the kitchens.

It has been a family project right from the start.

“From the time we planted our first trees the whole family has been involved,” says Annie. “Our own children grew up working after school and on weekends; now our 8-year-old great-nephew loves to come on weekends to help. I think that our customers enjoy seeing the different family members working together. We could not have built the business without the help and encouragement of each extended family member.”

A bit slow at first, the business nonetheless grew bigger each year to the point where today Apple Annie's receives over 75,000 visitors each year and is the largest U-pick operation in the state of Arizona.

Although most of the customers do come from Tucson, a fair amount of people come from Phoenix, as well as a reasonable quantity from the highway that runs through Willcox into neighboring New Mexico. Last year the Holcombs bought a nearby produce farm and opened a vegetable U-pick business as well.

Annie's son, Matt, runs the already quite popular vegetable business and says, “For sure, the customers' favorite items at the farm are the sweet corn and pumpkins.”

Asked if he thinks the vegetable side of the business could exceed that of the tree fruits, Matt says it's hard to tell. “We do a fair amount of wholesale with our vegetables and none with our fruit,” he says. “And most all of our customers like to visit both farms.”

When asked about whether or not the operation is “organic” John shakes his head. “We are not organic nor have we ever been,” he says. “With the apples, we need to spray for codling moths when the trap counts indicate that it's necessary. We also use mating disruption by hanging pheromones.” The farm is located surprisingly far south for an apple orchard, but at an elevation of 4,200 feet. “Even with our southern location, accumulation of ‘chill units’ is not a problem,” says John. A chill unit is a way of measuring the total amount of cold temperature that has occurred during a winter. “We do have a frost season from March through mid-May, and we use wind machines for frost protection then.”

The Holcomb's daughter, Mandy, now runs the marketing and publicity activities for the farm. In addition to a number of agricultural festivals held by the town of Willcox every year, Apple Annie's schedules at least seven major special events on its farms each year, scattered throughout the five-month-long season, starting with the Sweet Corn Extravaganza in July and ending with a Fall Pumpkin Celebration every weekend in October. A clever promoter, Mandy often takes baskets of apples or loaves of fresh apple bread as she tours the radio stations and newspapers of Tucson and Phoenix, drumming up enthusiasm for the well-attended farm events.

More Business than Farming?

Some would say that U-pick farms are easier to run than regular farms because the customers take care of the most fastidious and most expensive part of crop cultivation: harvesting. But running a U-pick is anything but the easiest way to farm. Government weight and measure regulations, insurance complexities, and health and sanitation codes can often make a U-pick farmer feel more like a businessman. Even with generous family participation, labor often accounts for more than half of a farm's expenses, and even just calculating all the employee wages, taxes and insurance is no small task. Most insurance companies are willing to extend existing farm policies to cover direct-marketing activities, but the cost of insuring a roadside stand increases with its complexity. Small farmers who sell value-added or processed food products also need to have product liability insurance. One quirk of U-pick insurance is the fact that many insurance companies will not write new policies for operations that permit customers to use ladders.

The Future

In general, the market for U-pick produce seems to be rising, and except for some traditional areas that are over-saturated with these farms, opportunities exist for new businesses everywhere. Existing businesses like Apple Annie's show no signs of slowing down, and they are happily welcoming the next generation of customers. “We have customers who started coming here themselves as children and now come bringing their own children,” boasts Annie. The children seem to be a key focus for the operation. School tours have become regular institutions, and quite a number of



Tucson-area teachers bring their classes every year. Annie admits that the tours are profitable for the farm, but more importantly “they are also the most fun aspect of our business. The children get so excited when they see fruit growing on the trees or the pumpkins in the field. I feel that it is really important for city kids to know that real people grow their food, not the local grocery store.” Grandpa Don concurs, stating that the most profitable part of the U-pick operation is “our emotional reward of seeing the children’s joy in the orchard.”

When asked if they had ever thought about starting a franchise of their successful business in another state, Annie laughs, “When would we find time? Sure, there are slow times of the year when we can relax and not work 80 to 100 hours a week, but during the season there is no such thing as a vacation, or even a day off!”

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