

Prepare for Your Barn Sale

Learn how to plan your extra-large rummage sale, country-style! Plus, market farm-fresh edibles, showcase your farm, promote your favorite country cause.

By Sue Weaver

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Is "barn sale" a highfalutin' name for a garden-variety yard sale? Certainly not! Country rummage sales are greater than outdated fashions and last year's Christmas toys.

Who doesn't love to stroll through an old barn, smelling the remnants of hay and livestock, scouring bargains and looking for the perfect addition to ... your barn!

It's really the perfect way to spend a Saturday, whether you're buying or selling.

And since hobby farms have a multitude of products to offer, both old and new, consider throwing one yourself on that next picture-perfect fall day.

What Can You Expect From Your Barn Sale?

Aside from typical yard-sale fare, a well-run barn sale can be the perfect venue to...Showcase Your Farm
If you raise dairy goats, hold your annual sale when kids are ready to wean.

Offer shoppers tasty morsels of goat cheese, samples of goat milk, distribute a sheet of favorite goat-milk recipes, pass out farm flyers and business cards, post signs stating "Kids and breeding stock for sale," and appoint helpers to give guided tours of your farm to point out the goats you wish to sell.

If you grow heritage apples, schedule your sale at harvest time. Reserve a spot for an attractive display of luscious, tree-ripened, sweet-smelling apples. Offer samples. Hand out a flyer describing your heirloom apples; include their culinary uses, history and a few recipes. Tuck an apple or two into each shopper's bag when you tally their purchases; you'll be surprised how many return to buy your fruit!

If you raise miniature horses, set up shop in springtime when foals are their cutest.

Erect a round pen housing a gentle mare with a friendly, fuzzy foal that visitors must pass en route to the sale.

© Karen K. Acevedo Post a greeter to distribute chunks of carrot so they can hand-feed the mare, offer cart rides for kids, dispense registry brochures (and your sales list) and hold a drawing for a handsome, plush toy horse, allowing children to enter for free.

Market Farm-Fresh Edibles

Because they're exempt from food licensing requirements in most sections of the United States (we'll talk about legalities in a moment), barn sales are great places to peddle excess garden produce, the fruits of your kids' pumpkin patch or homemade jams, candies, pies and bread from your own country kitchen. Yum! Create charming displays with baskets, antique linens and straw bales to really make an impact with shoppers.

Promote Your Favorite Country Cause

Group barn sales are the perfect way to raise money for charities, organizations such as agricultural producers groups and country youth causes like 4-H or a junior saddle club. Sales can be stocked with donated items or goods accepted on consignment and everyone can take a turn helping out. Sell sloppy joes and sodas as a fundraiser. Chat with buyers at a booth stocked with literature espousing your cause. Many such sales are held as annual events and people drive long distances to support them.

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Three Questions to Answer Before You Begin

So, you'd like to hold a barn sale to dispose of your family's clutter and to hawk the glut of veggies your garden produces each year? Before you commit, ask yourself three questions: Do I have enough stuff to warrant holding a sale?

The more you have to sell and the better you promote your barn sale, the more buyers you're apt to attract. No one wants to drive eight miles to a sale comprised of a card table covered with baby clothes, so if you don't have enough saleable merchandise of your own, consider hosting a multi-family sale at your farm (or theirs). Do I have enough time, energy and help to see this through?

Hosting a major sale is never a stroll through the meadow; it's rarely wise to tackle this project all on your own. At a bare minimum, recruit a crew of willing helpers to assist you on sale days and to help clean up at sale's end. Do I have a safe, spacious place to hold a sale?

This is where a barn sale beats a yard sale far and away—your covered sale won't get rained out if the weatherman deals you a rotten hand.

Wide-open machinery structures are logical choices—they're roomy and it's easy to see what visitors are doing at all times. Heated rooms such as offices and riding arena lounges are ideal venues, too. Choose a location you can clear out to create an open area spacious enough to accommodate tables and displays, ample walkways, and a check-out area near the door where you and your helpers can comfortably congregate.

However, inviting the public into your barn is not without risk. Check with your insurance agent to make certain your homeowner's policy covers barn-sale shoppers (most do), then choose a location with safety in mind. Remember, most shoppers aren't farm savvy and they often allow their children to run amok. If your sale area is adjacent to interesting hazards such as livestock to harass, machinery to climb on or farm lagoons to topple into, make absolutely certain you have enough help to effectively police the grounds at all times.

Not to be forgotten: easily accessible parking for shoppers' cars. Choose a roomy, mow-able area close to the sale itself and assign a helper to direct traffic and keep customers from parking in your yard.

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What (and What Not) to Sell

Apart from farm-generated goods like garden produce and kitchen yummys, most of what you sell will be standard rummage-sale items. Where do you get these things? Take a look around.

The average American's life is inundated with stuff. We buy stuff, we inherit stuff and we're given stuff by our friends. Our stuff gets old, so we buy new stuff and simply shove our old stuff to the side. Our closets overflow with stuff, our kitchen counters are covered with stuff and there is so much stuff in our garages that we have to park our vehicles outside. And it all costs money to maintain.

Consider this: We pay good money to insure our stuff; we move to larger homes to accommodate it or build add-on rooms and rent storage lockers to store it; and it takes time and way too much effort to clean it and keep it maintained. So devote a day or two to digging through your closets, junk drawers and attic. Do you need two spare Super Shooters? That box of moldering, 60s-era horseshow trophies?

The black velvet painting of Elvis that great-aunt Tootie gave you for Christmas in 1975? Then clear out a space in your home and in your life by selling your clutter to somebody else, and smile all the way to the bank.

And rest assured somebody wants your cast-off stuff. The Elvis kitsch collector will drool over Aunt Tootie's gauche painting, an antique dealer wants your trophies to market through his eBay store and two new families will enjoy Super Shooter cookies—and you get to pocket the dough.

What you shouldn't sell are junky, broken or badly stained goods; potentially unsafe baby items such as vintage cribs, strollers, baby gates and car seats; outdated protective gear such as riding, cycling, rollerblading and hockey helmets; dangerous toys like lawn darts; and firearms of any sort. And don't sell anything without its owner's permission—even items left behind by your grownup kids.

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9 Tips to Start Planning

If you answered all three qualifying questions in the affirmative, you're ready to start planning your sale. While there are many ways to organize and hold a successful barn sale, these proven tips will help you do it with minimum fuss and expense.

CHECK INTO LOCAL LEGALITIES.

In most towns and suburbs, and in some rural settings, you must obtain a sale permit and follow a set of rules. Regulations typically stipulate the number of sales you may host each year, what you're permitted to sell, and when and where you may post your signs.

PICK THE PERFECT DATES.

Avoid legal holidays such as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Labor Day weekends, and make certain your dates don't conflict with major events in nearby towns (or coordinate if your farm is on a thoroughfare en route to the big event).

Studies indicate the best days to hold a sale are Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday; for a two-day sale, choose Friday and Saturday. Sunday sales are said to be spotty at best. Schedule your event to coincide with times when people in your community get paid. The first weekend after the first of the month works extremely well.

SELECT AND PROCESS THE ITEMS YOU'LL SELL.

Find a place in your home where things won't be disturbed and divide it into two sections. Allot one for goods that are ready to sell and the other for items requiring your attention. As you finish preparing an item, label it and place it in a box on the ready-to-go side of your work area.

PRICE EVERYTHING AND PRICE IT WISELY.

Purchase, computer-generate or handcraft legible labels to affix to every item you sell. Don't rely on "make me an offer" techniques; many shoppers will leave rather than ask. Avoid easily switchable, color-coded labels (reds for 25¢, greens for 50¢, blues for \$1 and so on). Place labels where shoppers can easily find them. Create large, easy-to-read labels for big items like sofas, TVs and major appliances.

Price your merchandise to sell; if you don't know what your items are worth, attend similar sales and scope out sellers' prices or browse online auction Web sites like eBay. And if you like to deal, price things accordingly; most thrift-sale shoppers live to haggle.

Consider pricing items in increments of 25¢ so you won't need pennies and nickels for making change.

CLEAN AND REPAIR EVERY ITEM.

Wash and iron (yes, iron!) each garment, size it (make a notation on its price tag) and place it on a hanger. Studies find buyers will pay considerably more for neat, clean articles of clothing than they will for wrinkled, poorly cared for items.

Scour stubborn stains off cookware; de-grease tools and automotive items; and saddle soap used tack you plan to sell. If something is broken, repair it or affix a tag informing buyers of the fact (or simply plan to place it in a FREE pile).

ADVERTISE!

Place classified ads in local newspapers. "Penny savers" and community flyers are often best bets. Mention your best items, but don't list everything you plan to sell. Include dates, times and simple directions to your farm. Print or photocopy flyers to post on bulletin boards. Notify radio call-in programs. Phone your friends. Get the word out however you can.

CREATE ACCURATE, MEMORABLE DIRECTIONAL SIGNS.

Make them big (11" x 17" or better) and use dark, wide lettering that motorists can read from the road. Use arrows and make certain they point in the proper direction. Avoid flimsy paper that folds in the wind and self-destructs when it rains. If

you plan to host future sales, invest in signs you can reuse; wood and corrugated plastic signs are excellent choices. Affix attention-grabbers like Mylar streamers or helium-filled balloons.

Know the law before posting signs on public right-of-ways. Don't tack them to trees, utility poles or existing signage; it's best to attach your signs to sturdy stakes you can pound in the ground.

Use lots of signage—you can't sell your goods if buyers can't find you—and promptly remove it the final evening of your sale.

GET EVERYTHING READY THE DAY BEFORE YOU OPEN.

Refrigerate snacks, sandwiches, and beverages for yourself and your helpers; cache them where they're readily accessible. Place taste-test goodies and perishable sale items like jams, delicate garden produce or homemade bread in boxes so they can be easily transported to the sale in the morning. Make certain food display items such as crockpots, toaster ovens, and coolers are sparkling clean and ready to go to work.

Stock your cash box, money apron or fanny pack with a calculator and an assortment of change. Recommended: two \$10 bills, four \$5 bills, twenty \$1 bills, \$10 in quarters and \$5 in dimes (add \$2 in nickels if you choose not to price in 10¢ increments). Decide in advance if you'll accept checks and remember to apprise cashiers of your decision.

Arrange for background music so shoppers can converse without whispering. Choose an easy-listening station or a CD, not acid rock, twangy country music or heavy metal.

Put away or cover anything in your sales area you don't want to sell; if display items such as tables, sawhorses, and clothes racks aren't up for grabs, make signs to that effect and be sure to hang them.

Provide easily accessible extension cords and a supply of batteries so shoppers can try appliances, battery-operated toys and electronics before buying (but be sure to remove test batteries before closing the sale).

Categorize. Place all children's clothing in one location, all books in another, and all shoes and other footwear together in a third. Make it easy for shoppers to locate the items they've come to buy.

Avoid displaying merchandise on the floor; many shoppers can't (or won't) stoop or squat to view an item. If you don't own enough tables, rent or borrow more. Or create temporary surfaces by placing sheets of plywood or wooden doors between a pair of saw horses or two sturdy trash cans. If surfaces are rough or dirty, drape them with pressed bed sheets, blankets or paper.

Hang clothing according to type and size. Borrow clothes racks, stretch taut wire or chain between two solid objects, or fasten a pipe between a pair of step ladders and display additional items on the steps. Use your imagination, make things look nice. The more attractively your goods are displayed, the more likely they are to sell at good prices.

BE PREPARED TO DO BUSINESS WHEN THE DOORS OPEN (OR EVEN BEFORE).

Have everyone and everything in place before you're scheduled to open. Early-bird shoppers will be camped on your doorstep, so decide in advance if you'll allow them to shop before business hours or not.

Assign someone to guard the cash box; never leave it unattended. Pack a cell phone in your pocket, money apron or fanny pack to summon help in case of emergencies.

Greet shoppers with a smile. Stay available, but don't hover. Re-fold, re-stack and rearrange as needed. And most of all have fun!

Turn your clutter into money, show off your farm and meet new friends—and plan to hold a bigger, better barn sale next year.

About the Author: Sue Weaver is a freelance writer and hobby farmer who's experienced her share of barn sales down in Arkansas.

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