

Agritourism: Ideas and Resources

Martha A. Walker, Ph.D., Community Viability Specialist, Virginia Cooperative Extension

Since 1997, the National Agricultural Statistics Service has reported a continuous decrease in the number of farms and the number of acres being farmed (Farms, Land in Farms, and Livestock Operations: 2007 Summary, 2008). Thousands of agricultural acres have been redesigned into housing developments or manufacturing sites. However, Virginia agriculture is still ranked as the No. 1 state industry and is using every measure to maintain its economic impact on the state. One resource that local farms are finding to be highly successful is development of agricultural attractions that invite local residents and tourists onto their land to experience the peaceful but energized farm environment.



or educational purposes, to view or enjoy rural activities, including farming, wineries, ranching, historical, cultural, harvest-your-own activities, or natural activities and attractions. An activity is an agritourism activity whether or not the participant paid to participate in the activity.” (Code of Virginia § 3.2-6400).

For most people, agricultural tourism refers to a visit to a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural, or agribusiness operation in order to enjoy, be educated by, or become actively involved in the activities of the farm or operation – in other words, getting

a *true farm experience*.

Agritourism is recreation at its finest! Visitors might tour a vineyard, explore winemaking, or discuss the process of transforming grapes into high-quality Virginia wines. Younger guests (as well as many adults) may discover that goats are not dogs with horns, donkeys are different from horses, and milk does not originate in a plastic container in the grocery store. Tours of farm fields have enabled many people to realize that peanuts grow underground, and cotton grows on a plant – not in a bale. Visitors can pick pumpkins, apples, cherries, and other produce; or they can navigate corn mazes. Virginians are adding hayrides, barnyard animal visits, and ice-cream treats from a local dairy to the top of their “fun-things-to-do” lists.

The Definition

Virginia law defines agritourism as “any activity carried out on a farm or ranch that allows members of the general public, for recreational, entertainment,

Create a New Adventure

“Living on an Acre” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003) suggested that farmers develop a “rent-a-tree” operation. This idea would work very nicely for an orchard: The customer selects a tree and pays a rental price, and the farmer cares for the tree throughout the season. The customer could pick the fruit or contract with the farmer to harvest it. Creative ideas for agritourism activities are unlimited. However, before you start implementing a new farm adventure, you will need to analyze the liability issues and the financial feasibility in relationship to the farm’s character, values, goals, and financial resources.

Some of the best ideas for agritourism are published by the National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service (see www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/entertainment.html). However, numerous conversations and farm visits around the state have resulted in a variety of ideas for your consideration as part of a farm agritourism plan.

Potential Agritourism Activities

Agricultural museum and displays

Archery

Barn dances

Bed and breakfast accommodations

Biking trails

Bird watching

Birthday parties

Breweries

Cabin living

Campfires (don't forget the marshmallows)

Camping

Canning produce

Canoeing

Corn mazes

Corporate and group events

Cut flowers (picking, arranging, and planting)

Cut-your-own Christmas tree and evergreens

Farm cooking contests

Farm scavenger hunts

Farm stores and markets

Farm vacations (a day or a week on the farm: living, working, enjoying)

Fee-fishing pond (fishing, cleaning, and cooking)

Flower arranging workshops

Haunted barns

Hay wagon rides

Heirloom plant and animal exhibits

Herb walks

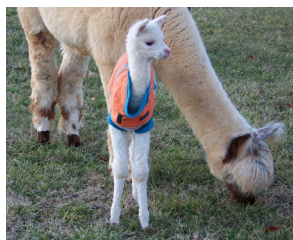
Heritage trails

Hiking paths (walking, identifying vegetation, determining a tree's age, picnicking)

Historic reenactments

"How-to" clinics

Hunting



Ice cream parlor or bakery

Jam- and jelly-making demonstrations

Meeting barnyard animals (participating in educational programs focusing on each animal: shear the sheep, milk the "demonstration" cow, or participate in "cattle college")

Music events (banjo and guitar lessons), concerts, and festivals. (Refer to *Preparing for an Agritourism Event: A Checklist*, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 448-501; www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/448/448-501/448-501.html.)

Orchards and pick-your-own (picking, sitting, picnics under the trees)

Pancake breakfasts

Plant a garden

Pony and horseback riding

Pumpkin patch (picking, painting, carving, and buying)

Quilting/weaving exhibitions

Restaurants/dining (farm food, slow dining, Sunday brunches, or local foods)

Snow sledding

Sorghum milling

Stargazing and moonlight activities

Storytelling/story swaps

Straw bale maze

Tours for children and families

Vegetable contests

Virginia Standards of Learning and the farm

Weddings

Winemaking and tasting

Wineries





Agritourism Partners

Agritourism is a growing industry within the commonwealth that is supported by the partnership of Virginia Tourism Corporation, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), and Virginia Cooperative Extension. Farm owners considering agritourism as a tool to sustain or expand farm profitability must examine the business model, entertainment options, operation logistics, and liability issues and coverage.

Agritourism operations are challenged by the cost of and access to insurance and liability coverage, unpredictable weather, the seasonal nature of the operation, health and code inspections, and the struggle to provide customer service to the sometimes not-so-agreeable public. These factors cannot be addressed in detail in just one document; they require the involvement of multiple experts and numerous face-to-face discussions.

Get Started

Before opening your doors to the public, take time to think about your options and the impact your choices will have on reaching your goals. There are some key steps to developing and implementing a successful plan.

- ◆ **Create a plan.** What farm experience can you offer the public that will make your operation unique, in compliance with all local ordinances and codes, and profitable? Your local Extension agent and farm management agent can help you identify alternatives. In addition, *Agritourism*, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 310-003, pubs.ext.vt.edu/310/310-003/310-003.html, provides an excellent guide for developing a plan.
- ◆ **Plan to grow your business.** After developing the initial plan to establish an agritourism business, you need to consider how to continually create new adventures to attract new guests and entice those who have already visited the farm to return. When considering growth, assess space limitations, availability of parking, maximum number of people who can be safely transported, time required to travel around the activity area, and seating capacity for activities.
- ◆ **Understand your liability.** When visitors arrive on your property, liability increases. Identify risk-management issues, implement safety plans to prevent identified risks, and obtain the necessary insurance coverage for your specific operation. Wise agritourism entrepreneurs consult their attorneys and insurance agents prior to opening their doors to guests.
- ◆ **Develop partnerships.** Talk to neighbors about your plans and ask for their support. Inform your economic development office and Chamber of Commerce about your plans to open a new business enterprise. Review road signage and confirm that directions to the farm are clearly marked.
- ◆ **Inventory existing attractions.** Ask the local tourism office to provide assistance in reviewing your publicity plan and linking to other local activities. Determine if other farms in the region are engaged in agritourism activities and explore the idea of all the farms developing a publicity partnership.
- ◆ **Visit other agritourism farms.** VDACS maintains a list of agritourism farms throughout the commonwealth at www.vdacs.virginia.gov/news/c-tourism.shtml.
- ◆ **Add your operation to tourism websites.** Contact the Virginia Tourism Corporation at www.virginia.org, and scroll to the bottom of the page to select “Add/Update a Listing.” (You will need to register for a free account.) Also be sure to list your operation with VDACS.
- ◆ **Know your customers.** Long-time agritourism entrepreneurs know that their customers want to slow down, relax, and truly enjoy a farm experience.
- ◆ **Set guiding rules for all farm visitors and communicate them clearly.** You will want to make the visit a wonderful experience for each guest. However, guests must follow the rules for handling animals, traveling through open fields, and avoiding areas that are not visitor-safe.

Conduct Research

To support your initial investigation, Extension has compiled a list of agricultural tourism publications and websites packed with suggestions, experiences, and facts. Hopefully the following resources will provide you with a strong base of information on agritourism and the data needed to guide your decision-making process. This resource list is just the beginning. It can spark unique ideas that – combined with energy and enthusiasm – can be implemented to make your agritourism adventure a one-of-a-kind destination.

Suggested Reading List

Agritourism

- ◆ ***Agricultural Tourism: Helpful Agricultural Tourism (Agritourism) Definitions***, published by the Small Farm Center at the University of California Cooperative Extension; www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/agritourism/definition.html.
- ◆ **Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services** lists numerous farms and other venues engaged in agritourism on its *Agritourism* website; www.vdacs.virginia.gov/news/c-tourism.shtml.
- ◆ **The Virginia General Assembly** defined agritourism activity as “any activity carried out on a farm or ranch that allows members of the general public, for recreational, entertainment, or educational purposes, to view or enjoy rural activities, including farming, wineries, ranching, historical, cultural, harvest-your-own activities, or natural activities and attractions. An activity is an agritourism activity whether or not the participant paid to participate in the activity.” § 3.2-6400.
- ◆ ***Agritourism***, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 310-003, delivers a comprehensive look at agritourism and includes information on risk management, zoning, environmental regulations, and other factors that affect a successful operation; pubs.ext.vt.edu/310/310-003/310-003.html.
- ◆ ***Preparing for an Agritourism Event: A Checklist***, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 448-501, guides you through the planning and implementation phases for hosting a large event on your farm; pubs.ext.vt.edu/448/448-501/448-501.html.
- ◆ ***Selected Topics for On-Farm Direct Marketing***, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 438-109, provides an excellent resource for developing facilities to sell farm-grown products to the public using well-defined merchandising strategies; pubs.ext.vt.edu/438-109/438-109.html.
- ◆ ***Direct Farm Marketing and Tourism Handbook***, developed by the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Arizona. Includes an excellent source for developing a business plan; www.ag.arizona.edu/arec/pubs/dmkt/dmkt.html.
- ◆ ***Direct Marketing Options for Farmers***, from University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, defines options available to local farms; www.uwex.edu/ces/agmarkets/publications/documents/A3811-11.pdf.
- ◆ ***How to Direct-Market Farm Products on the Internet*** is provided by the USDA and “designed to assist small/medium-sized agricultural producers develop Internet-based sales”; www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELDEV3101222&acct=wdmgeninfo.
- ◆ ***Using the Internet to Get Customers***, published by the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group; www.ssawg.org/documents/IBSbasictraining.pdf.
- ◆ ***Roadside Stands***, developed by Washington State University, contains numerous links on design, on-farm cooling, agritourism, and legal concerns. Although most references relate to the state of Washington, many will provide helpful guidance for Virginia producers interested in developing tourism options. www.smallfarms.wsu.edu/marketing/roadStands.html#A.



- ◆ **Entertainment Farming and Agritourism: Business Management Guide**, developed by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) Agriculture Specialist Katherine L. Adam. Dr. Adam reviews “entertainment farming” diversification options that work to add stability to farm incomes. She identifies three agritourism basics: 1) have something for visitors to see, 2) something for them to do, and 3) something for them to buy; and suggests numerous events and key activities to add value to your agritourism business; www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/entertn.pdf.

- ◆ **Agricultural Tourism Operation Fact Sheets**, a series of online fact sheets for agricultural tourism operations, developed by the University of California Small Farm Program; www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/agritourism/factsheets.html.

Corn Mazes: Companies that contract to create corn mazes.

- ◆ **The MAiZE**; www.cornfieldmaze.com.
- ◆ **Maize Quest Corn Mazes**; www.cornmaze.com.
- ◆ **Precision Mazes**; www.precisionmazes.com.
- ◆ **MazePlay** can assist with corn maze designs and construction; www.mazeplay.com.
- ◆ **Cows-N-Corn** in Midland, Va., offers dairy farm tours and corn maze adventures. The farm is owned and operated by the Jeff and Patty Leonard family; www.cows-n-corn.com.
- ◆ You may also want to visit Pattie and David Owen at **Owen Farm Tours** in Danville, Va.; www.owen-farmtours.com; and Bobby Williams at **Williams Orchard** in Wytheville, Va.; www.williamsorchard.com.



Pumpkins

- ◆ **Specialty Crop Profile: Pumpkins**, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 438-100, by Extension specialist Anthony Bratsch, offers advice on potential markets, site selection, cultivar recommendations, crop management, and harvesting; www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/438/438-100/438-100.html.

Economic Impact Studies

- ◆ **“Natural Wonders: Agritourism offers farmers a new way to bring home the bacon”** by Art Latham, published in *Perspectives* (Fall 2002), magazine of N.C. State’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, uses figures from the North Carolina Department of Tourism to support its premise that visitors will spend money if farmers group together and provide a tourist destination. “While the North Carolina Cooperative Extension agents who focus on alternatives to traditional agriculture don’t promise a total solution to a complex problem, they’re convinced that one answer for farm families is the culture of agriculture itself, spiffed up in a shiny new package aimed at upscale vacationers... ‘It may not be the total answer, but it will definitely help keep the family farm alive.’” www.cals.ncsu.edu/agcomm/magazine/fall02/natural.htm.
- ◆ **The Georgia Economic Issues Newsletter** (April 2003), a publication of the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service, defines agritourism and nature-based tourism in the article, **“Can Georgia Communities Benefit From Agritourism and Nature-Based Tourism?”** It reports findings from a 2003 study that assessed “the potential market and economic impacts of both agritourism and nature-based tourism” by examining the potential economic impact of a rural recreational guide

for hunting, fishing, and wildlife on 14 counties in southwest Georgia. www.ces.uga.edu/Agriculture/agecon/issues/april2003ntscp.htm.

- ◆ **Recreation, Tourism, and Rural Well-Being** (August 2005) is an economic research report published by the USDA Economic Research Service. Using regression analysis, the study assesses “the effect of recreation and tourism development on socioeconomic conditions in rural recreation counties.” www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err7/.
- ◆ Virginia Tourism Corporation provides excellent data on tourism and its economic impact at its website; www.vatc.org/research. The company also provides **Economic Impact of Travel** reports by locality, including admissions, lodging, and restaurant tax rates; www.vatc.org/research/economicimpact.asp.

Data Sources

- ◆ When looking for the latest agricultural statistics on a given region in Virginia, visit the **USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service** website; www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Virginia/index.asp. For reports and data sets covering the United States and international agriculture, refer to the **Economic, Statistics, and Market Information System**, a joint project of the USDA and Cornell University; www.usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/MannUsda/homepage.do; and the USDA Economic Research Service; www.ers.usda.gov/.



- ◆ **Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services** provides an excellent source of data on farm commodities, land, markets, and economic impact of agriculture; www.vdacs.virginia.gov/agfacts/index.html. The Consumer Services portal provides information on “Virginia Grown” programs; www.vdacs.virginia.gov/vagrown/index.html; and “Virginia Finest” products and information on food safety, organic farming, and other resources; www.vdacs.virginia.gov/consumer/index.html. Look for companies within your community at www.shopvafinest.com/.
- ◆ **USDA Agricultural Marketing Service** provides **State Marketing Profiles** with Virginia’s demographic and consumption profile available at www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/. (Select “Wholesale and Farmers Markets,” then select State Marketing Profiles.) Choose other options to get information on farmers markets, marketing research, organic agriculture, and/or Virginia in Brief.

Federal Data Sources Suggested by Cornell University

- ◆ **Agricultural Census Data by State** includes summaries by the Economic Research Service of USDA for agricultural, farmland, and demographic data; www.ers.usda.gov/.
- ◆ **USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service** reports agriculture census information available by state and county; www.nass.usda.gov/.
- ◆ **USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. Farms, Land in Farms, and Livestock Operations: 2007.** (2008); www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Todays_Reports/reports/fnl00209.pdf.
- ◆ **USDA/Economic Research Service (ERS)** provides the main source of economic information and research from the USDA, including a summary of federal laws and regulations affecting agricultural employers, and a section on organic farming and marketing; www.ers.usda.gov/Emphases/Rural/.
- ◆ **Social and Economic Data Web Site**, supported by the Social Sciences Institute of NRCS, brings together a combination of more than 200 county-level variables from the U.S. 2000 General Population Census, the 1997 U.S. Agricultural Census, and special agricultural census information provided by



the National Agricultural Statistical Service; www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/customdata/index.html.

- ◆ **County Business Patterns** does not include farming, but this Census Bureau data includes number of firms, number of employees, and payroll for agribusinesses, food processing, and all other NAICS (North American Industry Classification System) business categories at the county level; www.census.gov/epcd/cbp/index.html.
- ◆ **Regional Economic Information System (REIS)** provides detailed data compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis on personal income, sales, and other measures for both farm and non-farm business categories; www.ciesin.org/datasets/reis/reis-home.html.
- ◆ **U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder** is an excellent source for population, housing, economic, and geographic data; factfinder.census.gov/.

Acknowledgements

The author sends a special note of appreciation to the reviewers for their partnership in exploring these ideas and offering their best suggestions. This publication was strengthened because of the work of Andy Hankins, Virginia State University; Denise Mainville, Ph.D., Virginia Tech; Andy Overbay, Ph.D., Virginia Cooperative Extension; and Jesse Richardson, Virginia Tech.

Photo Credits

Cows-N-Corn

Midland, Va.

Jeff and Patty Leonard family, owners

www.cows-n-corn.com

Fishwood Farm Alpacas

Appomattox County, Va.

JoAnn and Dan Wood, and Nancy Fish, owners

www.fishwoodfarm.com/

Hickory Hill Vineyards & Winery

Smith Mountain Lake, Va.

Roger and Judy Furrow, owners

www.hickoryhillvineyards.com

Owen Farm Tours

Danville, Va.

David and Pattie Owen family, owners

www.owenfarmtours.com

Peaks of Otter Winery

Bedford, Va.

Danny and Nancy Johnson, owners

Peaks of Otter Winery's "Chili Dawg" wine won a 2009 Scovie Award for its 3rd-place finish in the beverage category.

www.peaksofotterwinery.com

RockCliffe Farm Retreat & Lodge

Appomattox County, Va.

Hugh Radcliffe and Joan Rockwell, owners

www.rockcliffefarm.com/