



Virginia Agritourism: Ideas & Resources

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For years, summer included a one week stay with my grandmother on her farm. Working beside my cousin, I learned how to hand tobacco leaves (three at a time), drive a tractor, and sit on a fence to watch the mules and horses graze in the pasture while waiting for the next assignment. I experienced the farm as a living and exciting community. My children did not have the same opportunities to live within a farming community because that wonderful farm is now a housing development.

Our farms face a constant struggle to increase revenue; and in most all cases, that revenue is tied directly to what the land can produce. Virginia agriculture has proven its ability to flourish and is still ranked as the number one state industry. One resource that local farms are finding to be highly successful is to develop agricultural programs, events, and attractions that invite local residents and tourists onto their land to experience the peaceful but energized farm environment.

Agritourism is recreation at its finest! Visitors to local farms might tour a vineyard 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 than horses, and milk does not actually originate in a plastic container in the grocery store. The tour of farm fields has enabled many people to realize that peanuts grow underground and cotton grows on a plant and not in a bale. People are hunting in the deer-filled forests and fishing in the well-stocked ponds. Pumpkins, apples, cherries, and other produce are being picked. Classes are being taught on artisan breads and cheeses. Corn mazes are being navigated. Wedding parties are enjoying the beautiful scenery and are filled with the sense of serenity that comes from gazing at the open landscape. Hayrides, animal barnyard visits, and ice cream treats made from the local dairy's milk are being added to the top of the "fun-to-do" list of many Virginians.

The Definition

The Code of Virginia defines agritourism 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 (Code of Virginia § 3.2-6400).

In most all cases, agricultural tourism refers to a visit to a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness operation in order to enjoy, be educated, or become actively involved in the activities of the farm or operation – getting a **true farm experience**.

However, before the label agritourism is applied to an operation, the location must first be a farm. In Virginia, a farm is defined in § 3.2-300 of the Code of Virginia as an "agricultural operation" and means *any operation devoted to the bona fide production of crops, or animals, or fowl including the production of fruits and vegetables of all kinds; meat, dairy, and poultry products; nuts, tobacco, nursery, and floral products; and the production and harvest of products from silviculture activity.*

Creating a New Adventure

Farmers know how to grow crops and raise livestock. Now they are opening their land to visitors and have become tourism entrepreneurs. Results from the 2015 Virginia agritourism economic impact study indicated that "the economic activity associated with the sector was an estimated \$2.2B with about \$1B of this representing 'fresh money' infused into the economy by tourists. The economic activity attributed to Virginia's agritourism sector supported approximately 22,151 full-time equivalent jobs, \$839.1M in wage and salary income, and \$1.2B in value-added effects. Moreover, economic activity stimulated by the sector generated approximately \$134.7M in state and local tax revenue in the Commonwealth during 2015" (Magnini, 2016).

How are these farms growing the agritourism industry? The farmers are analyzing their regions and identifying what people want to do and delivering it through the beauty of a farm environment. In "Living on an Acre," (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003), suggestions for farm enterprises included ideas such as vacation farms and dude ranches where visitors stay on the farm and participate in the farm chores and activities. Writers even suggested that farmers develop a "rent-a-tree" operation! The customer selects a tree, pays the rental price, and the farmer provides care for the tree throughout the season with the customer contracting the farmer to harvest the fruit or the customer would pick the fruit!

Creative ideas for agritourism activities are unlimited. However, before you step off the edge of the cliff and implement a new adventure on your farm, you must analyze the liability issues and the financial feasibility in relationship to your farm's character, values, goals, and financial capacity.

Some of the best ideas for agritourism are published by the National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service at <http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/entertainment.html>. However, numerous conversations and farm visits around the state have resulted in a variety of enterprise that may fit your farm's agritourism plan.

Agritourism Activities

Results from both the 2013 and 2016 Virginia agritourism studies found that Virginia farms were incorporating an array of events and activities into the farms' business plans in order to generate new revenue streams. The following list identifies most but not all of what Virginia farms are doing.

Examples of Virginia Agritourism Activities

Agricultural museum & displays	Brewery	Corporate & group events
Archery	Cabin living/camping	Cut flowers (picking, arranging, & planting)
Barn dance	Campfires (add the marshmallows)	Cut your own Christmas tree & evergreens
Bed & Breakfast accommodations	Camping	Farm cooking classes and contests
Biking trails	Canning produce	Farm scavenger hunts
Bird watching	Canoeing	
Birthday parties	Corn maze	

Farm stores & markets
 Farm vacations - A day/week on the farm (living, working, enjoying)
 Fee fishing pond (Fishing, cleaning, & cooking)
 Flow Honey (Educational programming and direct sales)
 Flower arranging workshops
 Food trucks with live music and other events
 Haunted barns
 Hay/wagon rides
 Heirloom plant & animal exhibits
 Herb walks
 Heritage Trails
 Hiking paths (walking, identifying the vegetation, determining the age of a tree, picnicking)
 Historic re-enactments
 "How to" clinics
 Hunting

Ice cream/bakery
 Jam & jelly making
 Log cabin rentals
 Meeting the barnyard animals (educational programs on each animal; shearing the sheep, milking the "demonstration" cow, or participating in "cattle college")
 Music events (Banjo & guitar training), concerts, & festivals (refer to Extension Publication 448-501, *Preparing for an Agritourism Event: A Checklist*)
 Orchards & Pick-Your-Own (picking, sitting, picnics under the trees)
 Pancake breakfasts
 Plant a garden
 Pony & horse-back riding
 Pumpkin patch (picking, painting, carving, & buying)

Pumpkin Chuckin
 Quilting/weaving exhibitions
 Restaurants/Dining (farm food, slow dining, Sunday brunches, farm meals, or local foods)
 Rodeo
 Snow sledding
 Sorghum milling
 Sports in the pasture
 Star gazing & moonlight activities
 Storytelling/story swaps
 Straw bale maze
 Tours for children & families
 Vegetable contests
 Virginia Standards of Learning & the farm
 Weddings
 Winemaking & tasting
 Winery

It is interesting that farms in other states have found a way to add adventure activities as part of their offerings. For example, Hellerick's Family Farm in Pennsylvania offers an aerial adventure on the farm complete with a ropes course, high poles, and a free fall experience http://www.hellericksfarm.com/high_ropes_adventure.html In New York, Elm's Family Farm includes a ropes course designed for children <https://www.ellmsfarms.com/fall-activities/ropes-course/>

Farmers are investing not only in crops and animals but also in on-farm experiences that bring paying guests to the farm and generate another source of revenue from their farm land.

Your Partners

Agritourism is a growing industry within the Commonwealth and 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 liability coverage, unpredictable weather, seasonal nature of the operation, health and code inspections, and the struggle of providing customer service to the sometimes "not so agreeable" public. These factors cannot be addressed in detail in just one document, but require the involvement of multiple experts and numerous face-to-face discussions.

Just as the farmer values the land and all it produces, the people who visit the land are held as a precious commodity with every effort made to keep the visitor from harm in what is usually a high risk environment.

Getting Started

Before you open your doors to the public, examine your options and the impact the choices will have on reaching your goals. There are some key steps to developing and implementing a successful plan.

- **Create your plan.** What farm experience can you offer the public that will make you unique, comply with all local ordinances and codes, and be profitable? Your local Extension agent and small business development centers can help you think through your alternatives. In addition, *Extension Publication 310-003 Agritourism*, provides an excellent guide for developing a plan.
- **Plan to grow your business.** You've developed the initial plan to establish your agritourism business. Now you should consider how you will continually create new adventures to attract new guests and entice those who have visited your farm to return. As you consider growth, you will want to assess the space limitations of your land, availability of parking, maximum number of people who can be safely transported and the time required to travel around the activity area, and seating capacity for activities.
- **Understand your liability.** When people arrive on your farm, your liability increases. Identify risk management issues, building safety features, implement safety practices to prevent accidents and mitigate identified risks, and obtain the necessary insurance coverage for your specific operation. Assess the accessibility for guests with disabilities. Confirm the load capacity for a structure where people will gather. Ensure resources are in place for emergency situations including marked exits and fire extinguishers. Wise agritourism entrepreneurs consult their attorneys, insurance agents, and emergency response teams prior to opening their doors to guests.
- **Develop partnerships.** Talk to your neighbors about your plans and ask for their support. Inform your economic development office and Chamber of Commerce regarding your plans to open a new business enterprise. Review the road signage and confirm that the directions to your farm are clearly marked.
- **Inventory existing attractions.** Ask for the local tourism office to provide assistance in reviewing your publicity plan and linking to local activities. Discover if other farms in the region are engaged in agritourism activities and decide if all the farms could develop a publicity partnership.
- **Visit other agritourism farms.** The Virginia Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (VDACS) maintains a listing of agritourism farms throughout the Commonwealth at <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/news/c-tourism.shtml>
- **Add your operation to tourism websites.** Contact Virginia Tourism Corporation at www.virginia.org and scroll to the bottom of the page to select Add/Update a listing. Be sure to list your farm with VDACS.
- **Know your customers.** Those who have been in the agritourism business for a long time know that their customers want to slow down and truly enjoy a farm experience.
- **Set guiding rules for all farm visitors and communicate them.** You 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.

Conducting the Research

Invest the time to dig deep into publications and websites where the authors have shared many suggestions, experiences, and facts. Contact your local Extension office and talk with the agents about their resources and experiences. Take time to visit with your local government office and discuss your plans with the zoning and building officials. Meet with your accountant, your attorney and your insurance provider to discuss your plans. Collaborating with your partners will build the best team to help you design your business plan and lay the solid foundation needed for a successful agritourism enterprise.

You will glean ideas that only you can implement and it will be these ideas that will make your agritourism adventure unique when combined with your energy and enthusiasm.

Suggested Reading List

The following resources offer you with a base of information on agritourism and data needed to guide your decision-making process. Remember, this listing of resources is just the beginning.

Agritourism

- **Definition of agritourism and other terms** published by the Small Farm Center at the University of California-Davis <http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/agritourism/definition.html>.
 - Virginia Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (VDACS) lists numerous farms and other venues engaged in agritourism at its Virginia Grown website <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/vagrown/>
 - 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.” § [3.1-796.137](#).
- **Agritourism** (2001, November), VCE Publication Number 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. <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/agritour/310-003/310-003.html>
- **Agritourism: Ideas & Resources**. Walker, M. (2009/2018) VCE Publication Number CV-310-004, outlines Virginia farms’ approach to agritourism. <https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/310/310-004/310-004.html>
- **Entertainment, Farming, and Agritourism: Business Management Guide** <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/entertainment.html> developed by 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. Suggestions are offered in each category.
- The University of California has developed an on-line fact sheet for agricultural tourism operations <http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/agritourism/factsheets.html>.
- **Preparing for an Agritourism Event: A Checklist**, VCE Publication Number 448-501, guides you through the planning and implementation phases for hosting a large event on your farm. <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/agecon/448-501/448-501.pdf>

- The Marshfield Research Clinic supports the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety which strives to enhance the health and safety of all children exposed to hazards associated with agricultural work and rural environments. <http://www.marshfieldresearch.org/nccrahs>
 - Its Agritourism Safety website <https://safeagritourism.org/> offers farms guidelines for assessing the farm environment and preparing to address farm safety issues. Be sure to visit the resources page <https://safeagritourism.org/resources/>
- **Entertainment Farming and Agritourism**, published by ATTRA, suggests numerous events and key activities to add value to your agritourism business. <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=264>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2003) Living on an acre: A practical guide to the self-reliant life. The Lyons Press. Guilford Connecticut.

Direct Marketing

- Virginia Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services & Walker, M. (2014) Direct sales: Certifying market scales CV40NP. (Factsheet) <http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-40/CV-40.html>
- **Selected Topics for On-Farm Direct Marketing**, VCE Publication Number 438-109, provides an excellent resource for developing facilities to sell farm grown products to the public using well-defined merchandising strategies. <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/homebus/438-109/438-109.html>.
- **Direct Farm Marketing and Tourism Handbook** developed by The Department of Agricultural & Resource Economics at The University of Arizona. Includes an excellent source for developing a business plan. <http://www.ag.arizona.edu/arec/pubs/dmkt/dmkt.html>
- **Direct Marketing Options for Farmers**, defines all the options available to local farms. www.mosesorganic.org/attachments/uwexdirectmarketingoptions.pdf
- **How to Direct Market Farm Products on the Internet** provided through the USDA and is “designed to assist small/medium-sized agricultural producers develop Internet-based sales.” <http://www.ams.usda.gov/MarketingServicesPublications> and select [Internet Marketing](#).
- **Using the Internet to Get Customers** published by the Southern Sustainable Working Group <http://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 related to the state of Washington, many sites will provide helpful guidance for Virginia producers interested in developing tourism options. <http://smallfarms.wsu.edu/marketing/roadStands.html#A>

Liability

- DeNoon, S., Richardson, J., & Walker, M. (2012). Managing Legal Liability Series: Workers’ compensation & vendor liability for farmers’ market owners and operators. VCE publication CV-24NP <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-24/CV-24.html>
- Richardson, J. (2012). Managing liability: Legal liability in agritourism and direct marketing operations. VCE publication CV25P <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-25/CV-25-PDF.pdf>
- Richardson, J. & Walker, M. (2012). Managing Legal Liability Series: Virginia attorneys: Members of the American Agricultural Law Association. VCE publication CV-20NP <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-20/CV-20.html>

- Richardson, J. (2012). Managing Legal Liability Series: Conducting the liability assessment. VCE publication CV-18NP <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-18/CV-18.html>
- Richardson, J. (2012). Managing Legal Liability Series: How much liability insurance coverage show I have. VCE publication CV-17NP <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-17/CV-17-PDF.pdf>
- Richardson, J., Walker, M. & Plourde-Rogers, H. (2012). Managing Legal Liability Series: questions to ask when comparing insurance coverage. VCE publication CV-19NP <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-19/CV-19.html>
- Walker, M. & Richardson, J. (2012). Managing Legal Liability Series: Sources of Insurance. VCE publication CV-26NP <https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-26/CV-26.html>
- Whitus, L., Richardson, J. & Walker, M. (2012). Managing Legal Liability Series: Insurance factsheet. VCE publication CV-16NP <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/CV/CV-16/CV-16.html>

Economic Impact Studies

- Lucha, C., Ferreira, G., Walker, M. & Groover, G. (2014). An overview of Virginia agritourism: Results from the 2013 profitability survey. https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/AAEC/AAEC-77/AAEC-77-pdf.pdf
- Lucha, C., Ferreira, G., Walker, M. & Groover, G. (2014). A geographic analysis of agritourism in Virginia VCE publication AEEC62P. <https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/AAEC/AAEC-62/AAEC-62-pdf.pdf>
- Magnini, V. (2017). The economic and fiscal impact of agritourism in Virginia. <https://www.vatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/TheEconomicAndFiscallImpactsOfAgritourismInVirginia.pdf>
- Scott, K. & Walker, M. (2016). New River Valley agriculture & agritourism strategic plan. VCE Publication CV-67P. https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/CV/CV-67/CV-67-PDF.pdf
- **Virginia Tourism Corporation** provides excellent data on tourism and its economic impact at its website <http://www.vatc.org/research/> In addition, the *Economic Impact of Travel* site <http://www.vatc.org/research/economicimpact.asp> offers reports by locality including admissions, lodging, and restaurant tax rates.

Data Sources

- When looking for the latest agricultural statistics on a given region within Virginia, go to this site http://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 USDA Economic, Statistics, and Market Information System <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/MannUsda/homepage.do> and <http://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 <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/agfacts/index.html>. The **Consumer Services** portal lists *Virginia Grown* <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/vagrown/index.html>, *Virginia Finest* products, information on food safety, organic farming, and other resources <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/consumer/index.html> Look for companies within your community at <http://www.shopvafinest.com/>
- **USDA Agricultural Marketing Service** provides **State Marketing Profiles** with Virginia's demographic and consumption profile available at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/> (Select Wholesale and Farmers Markets then select [State Marketing Profiles](#)) In addition, select other options to get information on farmers markets, marketing research, organic agriculture, and/or the Virginia in Brief.
- [Agricultural Census Data by State](#). Summaries by the Economic Research Service of USDA for agricultural, farm land, and demographic data.
- [USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service](#). Agriculture census information, available by state and county.

- [USDA/Economic Research Service \(ERS\)](#). The main source of economic information and research from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including a summary of Federal Laws and Regulations affecting agricultural employers, and a section on organic farming and marketing.
- [Social and Economic Data Web Site](#). The site, supported by the Social Sciences Institute of NRCS, brings together a combination of over 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.
- [County Business Patterns](#). Although it does not include farming, 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.
- [Regional Economic Information System](#). Compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, REIS provides detailed data on personal income, sales, and other measures for both farm and non-farm business categories.
- [U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder](#). Find facts and information on your community.