



By: GLEN G. ANTLE  
District Extension Marketing Agent

## FARMING KNOW-HOW

### Guidelines to Better Family Farming

# "Pick Your Own"

another marketing option  
for Michigan fruit and  
vegetable growers

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE  
Michigan State University

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**H**ARVESTING BY CONSUMERS, commonly called pick-your-own or U-Pick, has increased rapidly in recent years. More and more fruit and vegetable growers are finding it a profitable venture. The sizes and kinds of these operations vary widely because they must suit the needs of consumers in a particular area. Most customers of pick-your-own are middle class blue and white collar workers or retired people. The ethnic and social background of consumers in a given area influences their desire for home preparation and preservation of foods.

Quantity purchases are more advantageous to both buyer and seller and are an important factor in the growth of pick-your-own marketing. Increasing harvesting and marketing costs make pick-your-own harvesting more attractive to consumers. At the same time, producers can sell products below going retail prices and often net better returns than when selling through wholesale channels. As the general level of food costs increases, buying directly from the producer becomes more attractive.

Pick-your-own fills other personal and family needs as well as saving money. The trip to harvest fruits or vegetables can be a pleasant experience that strengthens family ties. It also provides a learning experience for children. Fresh air, sunshine and the chance to visit with a courteous and friendly farm family are other pleasures often associated with the pick-

your-own experience. A shady area with picnic tables where children can play and customers can relax after picking produce is an added inducement. A wash-up area and clean toilets add to the comfort and attractiveness of the place. The wise pick-your-own operator sells these values along with his products. They may be as important in making repeat sales as the fruits or vegetables themselves.

Since family needs now require more income than many small or medium-

size farms produce, an alternate source of income is needed. But, expansion of acreage is often impossible or impractical due to financing requirements or availability of suitable land near the present farm. Pick-your-own can often provide the needed increase in income from existing acreage. Total dollars income received from a given acreage of a well run pick-your-own crop is usually well above the amount received from products sold through wholesale markets. Savings in harvest labor,

#### SUCCESS FACTORS IN PICK-YOUR-OWN MARKETING

1. Long hours — hard work.
2. Must like people.
3. Family operation.
4. Honest employees.
5. Involve family in profit of operation.
6. Give customers individual attention.
7. Be prompt, courteous and friendly.
8. Many people within half-hour drive.
9. Grow produce of top quality.
10. Have neat, well-kept buildings and grounds.
11. Provide adequate parking.
12. Be able to handle overflow crowd.
13. Advertise as much as results warrant.
14. Be known for a specialty.
15. Have attractive signs.
16. Have a brochure of farm.
17. Give instructions for produce use.
18. Have regular hours — keep well publicized.
19. Make improvements regularly — use in publicity.
20. Show people how to harvest and handle produce.
21. Location easy to find on or near a good road.

*Above is a list of points usually associated with successful pick-your-own operations. These are among those that have been identified by several well known pick-your-own operators as well as prominent speakers and writers on this subject. They are presented here as a quick checklist of most needed attributes for success. Not everyone agrees with this list or that all points are necessary under all situations.*



packaging and packing costs add further to the net income. When family members can supply much of the needed supervisory help, labor income to the family can be substantial. Since many customers have jobs that prevent them from coming to harvest during the normal working day, a willingness to work weekends, early mornings and late evenings greatly increases the chance of success.

### START SMALL

Most successful pick-your-own operators advise starting small and growing into the business. Many growers who sell a substantial part of their production in this manner report it has taken 5 to 15 years to become well established. Records of one southwestern Michigan blueberry grower, who sells most of his production by pick-your-own, show that about 60 percent of his business comes from those who were customers the previous season.

Pick-your-own is a business entirely different from growing a crop. The experience of working with people, as well as developing a check-in, check-out system, managing the parking area, etc. takes time to establish and fit to your situation. From experience, the operator will also learn the best crops for his farm and those preferred by consumers in his area. These may differ for other producers or other areas. General guidelines are about the best anyone can offer another person engaged in or contemplating entering pick-your-own.

### PROS AND CONS

The advantages and disadvantages of pick-your-own listed below generally apply to most situations. Additions and deletions can be made to suit specific situation. Each operation is unique, depending on the individual abilities of the operator, the resources available and the potential customers. The degree of advantage or disadvantage in an operation is a matter of judgment. A well-managed operation with only moderate potential for success can be the best alternative for a producer. On the other hand, a good location, plentiful customers and other "plus" factors cannot make a poorly managed operation a success. The atti-

## ROADSIDE MARKETING

### Advantages

- More return per acre.
- Saves harvest labor cost.
- Immediate cash from crop.
- Saves container costs.
- May not need a packing house.
- Labor housing not needed.
- No sales commissions.
- Can improve public image for agriculture.
- Cold storage usually not necessary.
- Can make new and lasting friendships.
- Yields may be 10 to 15% more when picked fully ripe.
- Less produce is discarded due to gradeout.

### Disadvantages

- Liability for accidents.
- May not sell all of crop.
- Must work on weekends.
- Alternate market outlets needed.
- Parking area a necessity.
- Controlled entrance and exit needed.
- Must deal with all kinds of individuals.
- Rainy weather may reduce customers.
- Must have flair for promotion.
- Needs ability to work with people.

tude of the operator and his family is the most important ingredient to success for pick-your-own.

### RECREATIONAL VALUE

To make the most of the recreational aspect of pick-your-own, this characteristic should be promoted in advertising. The anticipation of a pleasant experience is half the fun of any recreational activity. To avoid disappointment, the actual harvesting of fruits or vegetables must live up to the customers' expectations. Finally, having pleasant memories of the trip to pick their own produce encourages several visits during the season or coming back again next year. Word-of-mouth advertising is another added dividend from satisfied customers. They tell friends and acquaintances of the high quality produce, pleasant surroundings and congenial people at your farm. Having neat, clean fields and orchards with high-quality products along with prompt, courteous check-in and check-out service by well-trained personnel are keys to success.

### RESORT TRADE POTENTIAL

State parks and nearby private or public resort areas have a potential for the pick-your-own market. Some vacationing families like to harvest a supply of farm fresh produce to take home for themselves and for friends. After a pleasant experience, this could become a planned part of future vacation trips. It is also an educational experience for the entire family. Advertising in news-

papers and on bulletin boards in resort areas helps attract this kind of business. A friendly relationship with desk clerks and managers at motels and campgrounds is helpful. It can encourage them to promote your pick-your-own operation as one of their attractions for the area.

### LOCATION

There is no simple method of evaluating a location for a pick-your-own market. But experts in this business generally agree that several location factors are important. Some of these are the following. Best opportunities usually exist near population centers. Other favorable locations include rural areas intermixed with towns and rural areas where there is little or no commercial fruit or vegetable production. The number of other pick-your-own operations in your area also should be considered.

### NEARNESS TO CONSUMERS

In central and southern Illinois, some growers report that more than one acre of pick-your-own strawberries per 1,000 population in a 30-mile radius results in price-cutting and reduced profits. There is a distinct advantage in being relatively close — usually within 15 miles — to your customers. There are exceptions to this rule, and many persons will readily travel twice this distance. Experience in Wisconsin with pick-your-own strawberries shows that a majority of customers live within 10 miles, although some drive 30 to



40 or more miles.\* Increased travel time and the added expense of long drives will, however, discourage many persons from visiting a remote farm. Michigan growers' experience for apples and blueberries shows most pick-your-own customers travel less than 20 miles, but some much further.

When customers travel 50 miles or more, it is usually for once-a-season harvest of a product for canning, freezing or storage. Those who travel farther usually purchase larger quantities. Carefully planned advertising is necessary to draw customers from distant areas. A location on a well improved road is a necessity. People object to traveling over poor roads to reach a pick-your-own operation. The location should be easy to find. Ideally on a state or county highway, straight out from a town, with directions easy to give and simple to follow. Take time to inform people in gasoline stations and other places of the best way to reach the pick-your-own location.

### PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

As commuter transportation improves, nearness to bus or rail stations could become a factor in your sales volume. In the past, resort areas have furnished station wagon service to meet trains or busses. This might also be a business-building technique for pick-your-own. Urban or suburban dwellers may prefer the more relaxed traveling by bus or train to the hazardous driving on congested multi-lane highways. If your customers use public transportation, provide containers that not only protect fruits and vegetables properly, but are also attractive and convenient to handle. Here is also an opportunity for an advertising message. A reusable container will offer extra savings to the consumer.

### PLANNING FOR PRODUCTION

Planning is a very necessary part of pick-your-own. A first concern is to grow crops that people want for both immediate use and home freezing and canning.

A succession of plantings for annual vegetables to give a longer harvest period is advantageous. Several vari-

\*See selected reference 9.



eties of fruit crops such as strawberries, cherries, peaches or apples that ripen over a period of weeks will encourage repeat sales. It also makes advertising and promotion programs more effective by giving people time to plan their visit to the farm after seeing or hearing announcements of available produce. With longer harvest periods it is easier to have a variety of items for sale at any given time. Continuity for a specific item as well as several different products encourages repeat business and larger purchases per customer. Unplanned impulse purchases increase when more kinds of high quality produce are available.

### RIPENESS AND FLAVOR

Tree-ripe and vine-ripe quality is a main attraction for pick-your-own. The final few days of ripening for tree fruits usually adds 10 to 15 percent in size. This means a worthwhile increase in yield and places many individual apples, peaches or other fruits into higher value size categories. Flavor is always best when fruit is tree-ripened. Freshness is promotable and saleable. People are much less critical of fruit or vegetable quality when they harvest the product. An apple dropped or found on the ground usually winds up in the container and is bought at full price.

Consider field layout that permits successive crop plantings to be separated some distance apart. It is easier to clean up one planting of a crop, like snap beans, before moving on to the next planting. Accidental, premature

harvest is easier to avoid when the various plantings are not adjacent to each other.

Many management problems in directing pickers to fields that are ready for harvest can be avoided by pre-season planning. Grower experience will be a great help in arriving at the best layout for a particular farm. The size and arrangement of fields as well as soil types, available irrigation and other factors will influence many decisions. Since you should plant crops on soils and sites that are the most productive, these very factors will determine where some crops are grown. As an example, strawberries need a loamy, well-drained soil and should be on a high site to reduce spring frost damage. A planned rotation of crops reduces insect and disease injury and will improve crop quality. Since product quality is one key to customer satisfaction, only the best production practices should be used.

### PRICING THE PRODUCTS

Know your costs. Studies of production costs for various fruits and vegetables have been done by Michigan State University specialists and Cooperative Extension Service agents working with commercial growers. Similar studies have also been made in Indiana and other states. If you do not have production cost records for individual crops, these studies may be your best cost estimate. Check the date of the studies. Any study more than one year old should have a correction factor for cost changes. Inquiries to other growers of the same crops may give some idea of production costs. If you know what it costs to produce a bushel of snap beans or a 10 pound carton of tomatoes, it is simple to know what the lowest selling price should be. Another factor in the pricing formula is the current price levels, both wholesale and retail. You can't afford to sell pick-your-own below wholesale. If you price above the retail levels for your area, you are not likely to move much volume. A point between these two figures is usually the price where you can move volume and also show a favorable return. Some saving over competing retail prices is usually needed to encourage people to pick their own.



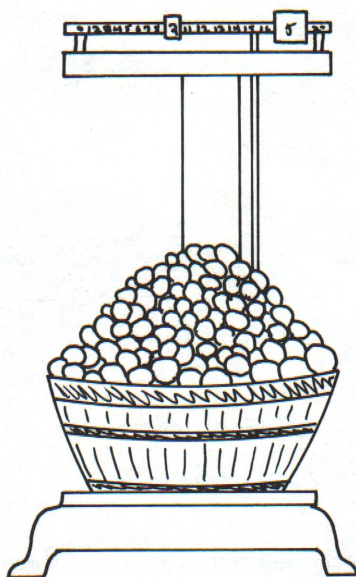
## QUALITY IS PARAMOUNT

Stress freshness and quality rather than low price. You must, however, be in line with other nearby pick-your-own prices where quality, convenience and customer service are comparable. Sometimes a competing producer does price produce below going pick-your-own levels. It will cut into the volume you move if quality and other factors are comparable. Some growers price their products low because they do not include all labor costs. In a friendly manner, talk over with any low-price sellers production and marketing costs that may justify a higher price. Each party must be free to decide his own pricing policy but should be aware of all factors involved. Avoid a price war, if at all possible. All parties will be hurt if produce is sold at or below cost of producing plus a reasonable marketing margin.

Tradition or past practice is sometimes the basis for establishing prices. Since costs and production practices change continually, it is well to regularly update the basis for your prices. Think price changes through carefully, before making them. Consumers tend not to trust prices that vary widely up and down. Most pick-your-own operators keep a given price for an entire season regardless of whether wholesale prices go up or down. Any price adjustment should be made at the start of the harvest season based on conditions at that time.

## LONG-TERM EFFECT

The best pricing policy will maximize returns for the products produced over an extended period of time. If you are to accomplish this objective, your customers must be satisfied that your prices are fair. They should be a little lower than non pick-your-own sources of supply for comparable quality. You need repeat sales; for most areas well over half the pick-your-own customers have been there previously. Cleanup specials for a last picking of strawberries, snap beans, pickles, etc., where produce is scattered and quality may not be the best, sometimes justifies a reduced price. Such a case should tend to be a promotional event and not alter regular pricing policies. The area in which your farm is located, the kind



and quality of your crops as well as cost of production, tradition and pricing policies of others in the area are all factors to consider in making pricing decisions.

## SELLING BY WEIGHT

The decision to sell produce by weight or by measure merits serious thought. Advantages of each method can be readily seen. The problem of customers overfilling containers is solved when produce is sold by weight. A weight basis of sale is fair for both buyer and seller. Various size containers whose volume is difficult to estimate can be used with assurance of a fair deal when selling by weight. Most producers who sell in this manner weigh containers and mark the empty weight on them with a marking pencil or crayon as the customer checks in for harvesting. At check-out time, the weight of the container is deducted from the total weight to give the amount of produce to be paid for. When sales are made by weight, scales must be approved by the Weights and Standards Division of your state government. In Michigan it is the Weights and Standards Division of the Michigan Department of Agriculture. An inspector from the proper governmental agency should check the scales for accuracy and affix his seal of approval before they are used for selling.

Sales by volume are simpler since no scales are needed. Usually containers for harvesting or measuring purposes

are bushel, half bushel, peck, quart, etc. Some instructions are usually given about how full containers should be. These may be in a printed handout sheet, or given orally when people check in. An inspection of harvested produce in containers to determine how well containers are filled, varieties harvested and amount of purchase is ordinarily made at check-out time. Produce is then paid for at the rate per bushel or other unit.

## SAFETY

A management concern of any business, serving the general public is safety. Many objects on a farm can be hazardous to people not accustomed to the surroundings. Hoes, rakes and other hand tools are not safe toys for children. Adults can also trip over tools, lumber, fencing materials and other objects laying on the ground. Store these tools away from public areas. Have a well-defined area for guests and their children to use. Definite routes along well-cared-for paths and roads should be plainly marked to prevent persons from straying into areas where not needed.

If guides take groups to a harvest area, there is less risk of people going to the wrong places. Instructions from supervisors or guides on use of ladders also promotes safety. Steep banks, deep ponds, areas where poison ivy may be growing and other hazards should be pointed out to pick-your-own customers. The owner is liable for almost any personal injury on his property. It is better to avoid the problem than to determine in court what damages, if any, you pay. Fencing harvest fields, or fencing off areas where possible injuries could occur, will reduce this risk. Fencing also helps guide people to where they should be. Adequate supervision answers many questions and avoids uncertainties on the part of those harvesting produce for the first time at your farm.

Sometimes the guide is also the supervisor and makes frequent trips to and from the check-in point to bring new groups to the harvest area. If separate supervisors stay in the harvest area, the guide should point the supervisor out to each new group and tell them to ask for any needed assistance.



Supervisors and guides often wear colorful or distinctive hats or jackets so they can be easily identified.

Ladders are usually considered a necessity in pick-your-own orchards that have full size trees. If growers, however, pick the tops of large trees before customers are allowed in the orchard, no ladders are needed. In some orchards of dwarf or semi-dwarf trees no ladders are provided. Here most of the fruit can be picked by persons standing on the ground. This is much safer for the customer. Any remaining fruit in tree tops is then picked by the grower or an employee. Many pick-your-own operators keep some ready-harvested produce to sell to those who do not want to pick their own or who want to buy more than they have picked. Some orchardists provide sturdy, wide-based step ladders no more than six feet tall. They then pick fruit left in tops of larger trees with regular harvest crews.

Either providing no ladders or short, wide based ladders greatly reduces the chances of injury. Inexperienced persons working on tall ladders are much more likely to fall than professional fruit harvest crew members. In no instance should pickers be allowed to climb trees or stand on limbs when harvesting fruit. Excessive tree damage and danger of falls are two very good reasons not to permit this practice. Good orchard supervision and tactful suggestions will usually eliminate much of the picker tree damage and risk of falls from ladders.

## EMPLOYEE TRAINING

You should train all personnel who work in the pick-your-own operation, whether family members or hired help. All employees should have some knowledge about the crops grown, areas being harvested, their location, etc.

Field supervisors need to be congenial and helpful. They should show people how to harvest to avoid damage to trees, vines or plants. Pickers usually appreciate instruction as to proper stage of maturity, how to handle produce without bruising and helpful hints on storage or preparation. Check-in and check-out personnel should be well-informed on usage of produce. They can give out brochures



and printed recipe folders and suggest sources of information such as the Cooperative Extension Service. Personnel who may not know the answer to a specific question should direct the customer to another person who has the information or knows where to find the answer. Good relations with customers are developed by friendly, well-informed personnel. A training program is the only sure way to have this kind of employees.

Employees can be trained individually or in groups by the owner or manager. In larger operations the group or class method will take less of the owner's or manager's time from other duties. All employees can usually benefit from training. For the new employee it is instruction in the normal operation procedures. Included pricing policies, cleanup specials, container sales, crops grown and field locations, product uses, how to handle and store fruit and vegetables, how to harvest, safe ladder use and other needed information. How to greet people in a pleasant manner and the need to be congenial



and helpful are also important items to include in employee training.

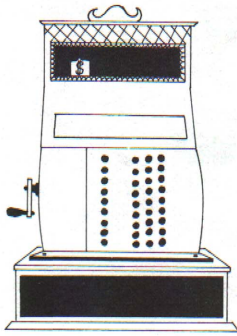
Each employee should have a definite area of responsibility and be provided with a full understanding of his tasks. Good general training will permit changing personnel from one job to another as the need arises with a minimum of retraining. Regular employees benefit from occasional refresher sessions to update them on changes in the operation and to keep them in touch with management philosophy.

## CHECK-IN, CHECK-OUT

Several methods of checking in and checking out are in use, and almost every pick-your-own operation has some variation. One very successful system utilizes a building through which all must pass to and from the fields. Fencing prevents other entry and exit, and no cars are permitted in the picking area. This system works best with relatively compact or concentrated planting areas. Cars are then kept in one central parking area, which may be safer. It also avoids checking trunks and back seats for extra produce. Dust created by traffic on field roads can be annoying when cars are driven to picking areas. The check-out area can also be a place to sell ready-harvested produce, snack foods, cold drinks and other items. In some cases these add up to a sizable increase in sales.

Moveable tables or stands with a canopy or roof are often used for checking pickers in and out. Sometimes two are used, one for checking in and another for checking out. This usually speeds up the process and facilitates





handling of larger crowds. Even two or more stations for both in or out can give faster service at busy times.

Cash registers help in keeping records of sales in a systematic manner. Accurate records of sales are important for determining which crops or what method of sales are most profitable. Sales tax reporting is much easier and less likely to be suspect by State Department of Treasury collectors when good records are kept. In Michigan, pick-your-own and other farm produce retail sales that amount to more than \$50 a month are subject to the State sales tax. The nearest County Treasurer's or Michigan Treasury Department office can tell you who and where to contact for tax reporting. Here you can receive up-to-date instructions on all aspects of State sales tax collection and reporting as well as retail sales license and other requirements.

## CONTAINERS

Many different containers are in use at pick-your-own operations. For crops like cherries, blueberries, raspberries or blackberries, the grower may find it practical to furnish picking pails of not more than four-quart capacity. The smaller-size picking container avoids bruising of fruit, because there is less weight on fruit in the bottom of the pail. The fruit can be transferred to boxes, lugs, trays or other containers for taking home. For many crops like snap beans, tomatoes, apples, grapes, etc., customers often pick directly into the same containers they take home. In any case, customers who bring their own containers save money. And the grower saves time and trouble if he does not have to stock containers. Many growers sell containers to persons who do not have any, or who want more produce than their own

containers will hold. One strawberry grower developed a fold-together, corrugated cardboard tray that is 9 x 12 inches finished size and 3 inches deep. He furnishes these at no extra charge to all who pick their own. The container holds about three quarts of fruit and costs the grower less than any other available container. No carrier is necessary and people pick directly into the tray. There are many similar innovations. Some growers who sell pick-your-own produce, sell used containers to customers at or near cost. These must be clean and must not have been used for meat, fish, poultry or dairy products. Alert growers can often reduce costs and price their produce more attractively by giving the consumer a good deal on the container.

## GETTING TO PICKING AREA

Moving customers and their produce to and from fields or orchards can be a problem, especially when fields or orchards are scattered over a considerable distance. The least costly and least troublesome system is where people walk to and from fields. This system is practical where a central parking lot is near the fields. Guides can lead groups to and from picking areas.

Hand carts made with bicycle wheels are one way to haul produce from field to parking lot. Some growers run wagons, drawn by tractors for this purpose. Pickers, as well as produce, are often moved by tractor-drawn wagons. This is an added expense. Since accidents occur, additional liability risk is involved. Before you decide whether to transport pickers to and from picking



areas, or let them walk, discuss the alternatives with other pick-your-own operators.

If you are considering letting people drive cars to the picking area, think through carefully the advantages and disadvantages. Driving to harvest areas may save time, and it provides transportation for both people and produce. A central parking area may not be needed or it may be quite small. On the other hand, roads will have to be well marked with signs to direct people to harvest area. During rainy periods, cars can get stuck in fields or orchards. People sometimes drive over fields or areas where they should not go. Crops can be damaged by cars not following roadways closely. You may become liable for injury or property damage occurring on your property. It is difficult to supervise parking so cars won't block roadways. There should not be a back road out of the harvest area to tempt some to leave without paying for produce. It may be necessary to inspect back seats and car trunks when pickers check out.

## REPEAT BUSINESS

Once a customer comes to a farm to pick one produce item, he or she is more likely to return for other items. We all tend to be creatures of habit. It is easier to go where we are familiar with the road, the parking arrangement and the check-in, check-out procedure. If you produce a number of different crops, your customer is likely to buy some of several that are available at that time. A succession of plantings of the same crop gives a longer harvest season. It also often induces a pick-your-own customer to return for more of the same item later. A prime objective of having a variety of items available over most of the growing season is to increase the dollar sales for each visit to the farm. When customers buy more at one time, the grower's operating overhead expenses are less per dollar of sales. Car parking, check-in check-out, explaining where and how to pick and all other services are less when fewer pickers are needed to sell a given volume of produce. Anything you can do to sell more to each pick-your-own customer will increase net returns from this method of produce sales.



## PARKING AND ROADS

Parking is a necessary part of the facilities for any pick-your-own operation. In most situations it is illegal to allow cars to park along public roads. A parking area is necessary and should be convenient to the picking area. If harvest sites are scattered, a separate parking area at each site may be the most practical solution. This decentralizes the operation and results in less control of traffic and more difficult check-in and check-out procedures. A central parking lot is easier to maintain, generally safer and easier to manage when several dozen or several hundred cars arrive on a busy day.

A sod or gravel surface on parking lots is usually preferred. If a lot has high usage over a long season, asphalt surfacing is advisable. In any case, good drainage is a must. It prevents muddy feet, stuck cars and other problems. Customers will not return if parking is difficult, dangerous or inconvenient. A parking lot attendant at busy times is good business. This person can maintain orderly parking and prevent cars from blocking driveways or taking more space than needed. It is good if cars can leave the parking area by driving forward rather than backing out of parking spaces. If parking spaces are marked off, a width of 10 feet is needed. Parking spaces need a 20 foot length. The driveway width between rows of cars should be at least 25 feet. These measurements can help you calculate the parking capacity of any given area. Crowding more cars into an area than is convenient or safe is a common mistake. You can avoid it by good planning.

## MAINTENANCE

Roadways must be maintained in smooth and reasonably dust-free condition. A speed limit of 10 to 15 miles per hour will help avoid excessive road wear. A prominent speed limit sign at the entrance and another at parking areas will usually be enough. The parking lot attendant should not hesitate to remind speeders of the posted limit.

Roads that have more than occasional usage should be graveled. Culverts over drainage ways are justified to prevent water holes and muddy places from developing. The roadway will

need shaping with grading equipment and an occasional going-over to fill holes and smooth rough spots. Additional gravel will usually be needed on roads with this surface every one or two years. For heavily traveled roadways to and from a central parking area, asphalt surfacing can often be justified. The entrance, roadway and parking area are the first impression pick-your-own customers get when they arrive, so it is worth extra effort to make this first impression favorable.

## PICNIC AREA

Rest and picnic areas create a more relaxed atmosphere where older people and children can wait while Mom and Dad and older children pick the produce. Families sometimes bring picnic lunches to make the trip a recreation event as well as to buy farm fresh produce. You can sell pleasant surroundings and country atmosphere as well as fresh produce. A picnic area may have added attraction in areas near large cities where industrial developments make noise, and pollution-free parks are a rarity.

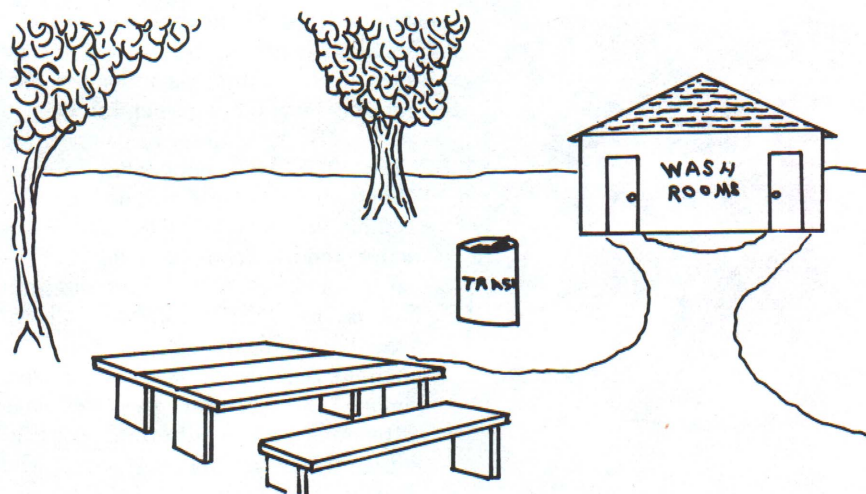
Wash-up facilities and clean toilets are a must if you wish to promote a convenient and comfortable atmosphere. Repeat business will be encouraged when the pick-your-own experience has been pleasant. Dirty or sticky hands from harvesting fruit or vegetables do not create a pleasing memory. Washing the face and hands helps to cool off and refresh the picker after working up a sweat harvesting produce.

## FENCING

Fences can be both decorative and functional. Woven wire fences four feet or more in height will usually keep people from wandering into other places. A fence can separate the parking lot from harvest areas. The fence will also assure check-out of produce before it is loaded into cars. During busy times, a positive check of all produce may be difficult without some directing of crowds by fencing or other means. Wood slat snow fences can be used as a temporary means of directing people or separating areas. Avoid barbed wire or other material that can easily injure children or other people. Don't allow children to climb on fences. Besides damaging the fence, they may be injured. Fence off danger areas, such as deep ponds, very steep banks or vertical cliffs. Cattle, horses, hogs or other livestock can be hazardous for children or persons not accustomed to livestock. Dogs can also be effectively kept away from customers by good fencing.

## STRUCTURES

Buildings that are used directly in the pick-your-own business can vary from a simple check-out stand to large impressive structures. An existing barn may provide shelter from sun and rain, and space for picking containers, ladders and other supplies. It can also be an attractive check-in, check-out station. Some remodeling and painting will make most barns more attractive and thus better serve the needs of this business. A clean, neat check-out and





supply storage facility usually denotes a good grower who sells quality produce. The quality image can be imparted here just as much as in the field or orchard. Buildings do not have to be large or fancy, but they should be neat and well maintained. Expensive looking buildings may impart a high produce price image to customers.

Movable check-out stands on runners or wheels that can be towed by a tractor are often used. For strawberries, snap beans, tomatoes or various other crops, some operators prefer this concept to the permanent central check-in, check-out station. If parking is at the picking area, movable check-out stands are often preferred. Neat, attractive, functional buildings that are adequate for the volume of business are all that is needed. Money spent beyond this point on buildings will not be a good investment.

### COURTESY AND CONCERN

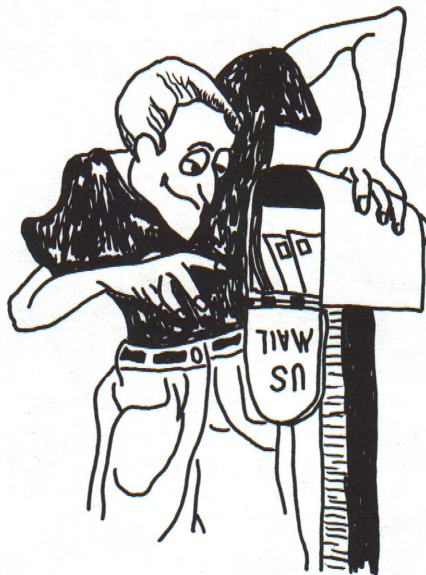
A certain amount of bad luck — a flat tire to change, locked-in keys or a stalled engine — is likely to occur. Some help and friendly advice at such times will usually be greatly appreciated and long remembered. It is good business to be friendly and helpful. It helps build the neighborly image that will go a long way to bring people back. You don't have to be an expert mechanic or have a parts supply, but knowing a reliable garage or service station that can take care of the more serious problems is very helpful. Often a telephone where a woman can call her husband or favorite service station, will be the best answer to the problem.



### ADVERTISING

One point on which most pick-your-own operators generally agree is that word-of-mouth advertising is the best and cheapest. When someone tells a friend about the fine quality produce they picked themselves — and saved money too — it is effective advertising. Since this method of advertising does not reach new areas very effectively and usually needs supplementing, various other methods are often used. Disagreement is common on which is best or most economical. Crops to be sold and the area from which customers come will influence the choice of method.

Many growers maintain a mailing list of customers. Notices can then be sent to customers when crops will be ready for harvest. Often included in the starting harvest notice, is a calendar of when later items will be ready.



Printed postal card type handout material with name, address and a road map to the farm to pass along to customers is low-cost and helpful. Or you can mail a late winter or early spring newsletter about happenings around the farm and crops planned for the coming summer and fall harvest. Newsletters tend to create a feeling that the customer is not only part of the farm but is the very reason why all the activity and planning is going on. This method is likely to be more effective among people in urban areas who have little other contact with rural people or agriculture than for customers who live in the country.



### MASS MEDIA USE

Newspapers and radio can both be effective means of advertising. You should recognize the advantages and disadvantages of each. A classified advertisement in a daily or weekly paper covers a large area, usually at a relatively low cost. It can alert people to items approaching maturity, give directions to the farm and state price and days or hours open for business. There is usually a time lag of a few days for daily newspapers and a week or more for weekly papers before readers receive the message. A larger block style advertisement (called display ad) is more expensive but also more effective in newspapers.

Radio can draw quick response when 30-second or one-minute spot announcements are repeated several times each day for a few days. If rainy weather has kept pickers away, short spot radio announcements and a clean-up price can often solve the problem.

Handbills, like those used for auction sales, posted at campgrounds, in restaurants and at filling stations will attract added business.

It is important to calculate increases in sales in relation to amount of money spent on advertising. You can reach a point where it is not profitable to spend more to sell more produce. Many businesses, other than agriculture, allocate from 5 to 10 percent of gross sales for advertising and promotion. During the establishment period for a new business or an expansion period a larger budget can be justified. Look closely at any promotion or advertising proposals larger than the above guidelines and be sure it can be justified. Many successful pick-your-own operations spend only one or two percent of gross sales for advertising and promotion.



## GIFT CERTIFICATE

A form of preselling that has appeal for some people and in some areas is the gift certificate. They are usually bought for Christmas gifts or for birthdays or other occasions. They have some promotional value in addition to selling produce to someone who may not have previously had the pick-your-own experience. This item can be promoted and used in off-season — and redeemed by picking your own when produce is ready to harvest.

When promoting gift certificates, play up the “farm fresh” theme and unmatched flavor as well as better nutrition from vine or tree-ripe produce. These attributes for fresh picked produce are all true. Capitalize on them in your promotion.

For economy-minded customers, “cleanup specials” are an inducement to buy more than otherwise. They provide extra income that you might not otherwise get. Avoid overpromotion of this part of the crop, as it could encourage customers to wait for the special. Some growers feel these specials reduce regular sales.

In some cases the delay of a few days in plowing down a field after harvest will not permit a second crop on that land that season. In this instance a cleanup special would certainly not be justified. The value of cleanup specials is often similar to grocery or merchandise specials—largely promotional with very little profit. They bring in new customers who may buy other items at that time or return later for other crops.

## BROCHURES AND FOLDERS

A form of low-cost, effective advertising is the printed recipe folder given to customers. It can contain directions for preparation, cooking, canning or freezing various items that are sold. These may be for only one item or can include several. A quantity purchase of the various commodity leaflets that describe storage, handling and usage of produce items prepared by Consumer Marketing Agents at Michigan State University is one way to secure very excellent low-cost handout material. These leaflets cover many of the fruits and vegetables grown in Michigan and neighboring states. Holders or

racks can be placed at the check-out station so customers can take the folders they want, free choice.

To conserve your stock of recipe folders, display sample copies on a bulletin board and give individual copies out on request. On leaflets and folders, have your name imprinted along with directions for reaching your farm. A well written, attractive printed message will be more effective than a hard-to-read mimeograph, even though both have the same information.

You can also use brochures or pamphlets to supplement a periodical newsletter or use in place of a newsletter. They can describe your farm as to size, location and history; and you could include the history of the surrounding community. Of further interest to customers would be the crop varieties you plant and your cultural practices such as kind of tillage, fertilizer programs, irrigation, frost protection, harvest methods, etc.

Why not add helpful hints such as how to tell when fruits and vegetables are at right maturity, weight of a bushel of various product items, a few choice recipes? A separate leaflet of favorite local recipes could include a list of your farm-grown products and their harvest dates.

Tote bags, boxes or other containers given or sold to customers can be valu-

able advertising pieces. Imprint them with the name of the farm, crops grown, average harvest dates and directions to reach the farm. A simple map, showing major roads and locations of direction signs can also be printed on the container. Fruit and vegetable containers are often used a second or third time in homes. They serve as reminders of your pick-your-own experience. If a friend or neighbor asks where to get various produce items, you can give them a container with all the needed information printed on it. For quantity purchases of 1,000 or more bags or boxes, many manufacturers will print messages at either no cost or a very nominal extra charge.

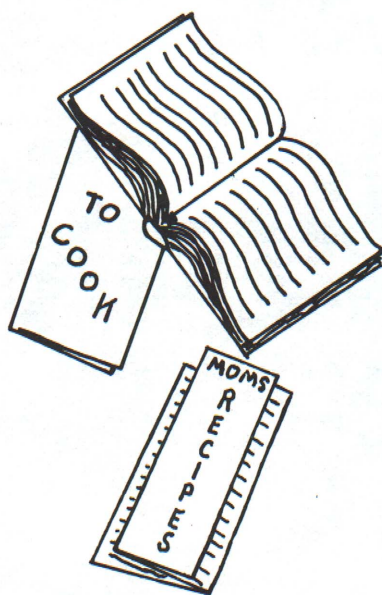
## FIVE-YEAR CLUB

A clever way to get pick-your-own customers to list their names and addresses, is to ask them to sign up for free produce. When they come back for five consecutive years, their names are entered on a large poster in the check-out area and they are allowed to pick a free container of produce. It may be a half-bushel of peaches, 10 pounds of blueberries, a bushel of pickles or any other amount or kind of produce. Well before the produce item is ready for harvest, send the five-year club winner a congratulatory letter notifying him or her of the free produce. The free produce not only encourages people to return from year to year but helps keep the mailing list up-to-date. Posting names of the winners in a conspicuous place creates interest. It is a way to help fulfill the human need for recognition.

## SPECIAL EVENTS

Blossom tours to orchards on the pick-your-own farm can create good will and alert consumers to the coming harvest.

Give your farm a distinctive name or trademark and use it on highway signs. On the forerunner sign, tell customers how to reach your farm. Show distance in tenths of miles. This unit can be easily measured by the car's odometer. Do not mention price on highway signs. Signs at or near the check-in station are better for showing prices. Be sure to check with state and





county road commissions on regulations concerning the use of signs along public roadways.

Have a professional artist letter your larger signs. On smaller information and directional signs, stencils or letter guides are acceptable. Following, in table form, is color combination information, (effects of letter size on distant signs are readable), rate of travel to comprehend different message lengths and distance traveled during the reading of a sign at various speeds. This information will give you a basis for designing attractive and effective signs that will enhance the quality image for your pick-your-own operation.

### READABLE SIGNS

Numerous tests on legibility of signs in different colors have been made from fast-moving vehicles. Color combinations are listed below in the order of their visibility and legibility at a distance. (For a complete listing of color combinations and legibility, see *Principles of Color Mixing* by J. H. Pustanoby, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1947).

Seldom will anyone use all of the

### Most Easily Read Color Combinations

1. Black on yellow
2. Black on orange
3. Yellow-orange on navy blue
4. Bottle green on white
5. Scarlet-red on white
6. Black on white
7. Navy blue on white
8. White on navy blue
9. Yellow-orange on black
10. White on black
11. White on bottle green
12. White on scarlet-red
13. White on purple
14. Purple on white
15. Navy blue on yellow
16. Navy blue on orange
17. Yellow on black
18. Scarlet-red on yellow
19. Yellow on navy blue
20. Purple on yellow

various advertising and promotional methods listed here. Usually some of these methods will have more practical application in a given situation than others. It is a matter of judgment which ones to use. The cost-benefit ratio of the different methods and materials

should be the guide to their use. Signs both on roads leading to the farm, at the entrance and around the farm to direct people and give instructions are a most effective way to convey information. Signs are the one most useful advertising tool for pick-your-own operations.

### INSURANCE PROTECTION

The lack of insurance protection can be a costly mistake for you. Just one severe accident by a pick-your-own customer at your farm can wipe out a lifetime of savings. You cannot afford to be without liability insurance. You are liable for almost any injury that occurs on your property. The posting of a sign "Not Responsible For Accidents" does not free you from liability. Helpful preventative measures include well maintained equipment; short, sturdy picking ladders; paths and walkways free of holes; marked and well-lighted steps; and hand rails. Fencing and guard rails around machinery or danger areas and keeping spray equipment and materials away from pickers are other needed safety measures.

Post ground rules regarding ladder use and riding on wagons or trucks that haul people or produce to and from picking areas. Include in the ground rules, appropriate do's and don'ts in a concise easy-to-read form. Give a printed copy to each person who comes to pick their own produce. If an accident occurs as a result of violating posted rules, the persons involved cannot claim they were not informed of the hazard. While this will not necessarily relieve you of responsibility, it will certainly be a factor in your favor. It may prevent a damage claim.

Most home or farm liability insurance policies will not cover a pick-your-own operation, if more than an occasional sale of produce is made in this manner. Check with your insurance agent and secure the needed coverage. Be honest and frank with your insurance agent about the nature of your pick-your-own business. If he is uncertain as to the limits of your coverage, ask him to spell this out in your policy or in a letter of explanation from the company carrying your insurance. The premium will likely be considerably higher than for regular farm liability insurance.

### Visibility, Letter Size and Content of Roadside Market Signs

Distance from which sign must be visible to be fully read	Minimum letter height*	Number of words which can be read by the average motorist traveling at various speeds**			
		30 mph	40 mph	50 mph	60 mph
Feet	Inches				
50	1¾	4	2	1	0
100	3½	8	5	4	3
200	7	15	11	8	6
300	11	22	16	13	10
400	14	30	22	17	14
500	17½	38	28	22	18

\*Letters should be made using lines at least 1/5 as wide as the letter height. For example, letters 11 inches in height should be made with lines about 2-1/4 inches wide.

\*\*This assumes the reader gives full attention to the sign, has normal visual acuity (20:20) and is able to read and comprehend at the rate of 200 words per minute. Use posted speed limits as a guide to the speeds at which motorists travel unless more accurate information is available.

### ADVANCE SIGN LOCATIONS FOR VARIOUS SPEED ZONES

Speed Limit (miles per hour)	Distance from advance sign to market*
30	2/10 mile
40	1/4 mile
50	3/10 mile
60	4/10 mile

\*Based upon a decision time of 20 seconds plus reaction times and braking distances for a car in good condition on a dry, paved highway. Reaction time and braking distances obtained from *Sportsmanlike Driving, Third Edition*, published by the American Automobile Association, Washington, D.C.



## RENT-A-TREE

"Rent-A-Tree" is a relatively new idea in pick-your-own marketing of fruit. It has been used in Germany and some other European countries in the past 10 to 15 years, and is being tried by growers in several states. A Michigan grower with two-years' experience indicates "rent-a-tree" can add to other pick-your-own or farm market business. He doubts that it can be justified as the only farm marketing venture. The "rent-a-tree" idea could perhaps, also be used for a row of strawberries, tomatoes, pickles or other produce.

## SPELL OUT THE TERMS

In the typical "rent-a-tree" arrangement, the grower rents an apple or other fruit tree to a family for one season. The renter is free to visit his tree in the orchard and use the picnic area as often as he desires. He and his family must adhere strictly to the printed rules and posted signs. Among other things, the rules state the hours of the day and the days of the week the orchard is open for visiting. Also included should be specific areas where picnicking, hiking and other activities are permitted and the areas where visitors are not to go. The grower does all pruning, fertilizing, spraying and other cultural practices, and provides ladders for harvesting. The renter is notified when his tree is ready to pick and harvests all the fruit from his tree. All the fruit may be picked at one time, or he may pick the riper fruit first and then return to pick again as more matures. An identification card is provided for each tree renter. This card bears a number that corresponds with the number on his tree. The signed rental contract should state plainly the rights and privileges of the renter along with restrictions he must adhere to. It should also state what the grower will do regarding tree care, grounds maintenance, etc. A clause should be inserted giving the orchard owner the right to cancel the contract and refund the rental fee in case the tree renter or his family does not follow the agreed-to rules of conduct.

The grower cannot avoid liability for injuries that occur on his property by posting signs saying, "not responsible for injuries". He can, however, limit activities and areas that are covered in the rental agreement. This would put the "rent-a-tree" customer in the position of trespassing in restricted areas and would certainly make a claim for injuries incurred on unauthorized parts of the farm less likely to be collectable. Conditions such as how well areas are marked and how specific the rental contract is written all affect grower liability. It is wise to do everything possible to avoid any likelihood of an accident. Good maintenance of roadways, fencing of dangerous areas, and eradication of poison ivy and other poisonous plants can be helpful. A friendly visit with the "rent-a-tree" family, pointing out interesting as well as hazardous features of the farm will go a long way toward avoiding problems.

## SPECIAL FACTORS

Experience shows several factors which will make the "rent-a-tree" idea work better. The orchard should be somewhat secluded so that other fruits or crops are not likely to be damaged by inquisitive children of the renter family. A nearby picnic site and wooded area with hiking trails adds greatly to the recreational value of renting a tree. Areas where grass and weeds grow should be kept neatly mowed and the place should have a well kept appearance.

The grower and his employees must have the ability to work with people. Spraying, mowing and other cultural operations in or near the "rent-a-tree" part of the farm should be done at times that will not interfere with visiting hours or on visiting days. This will require planning and perhaps some adjusting of work schedules. A sizable farm with interesting scenes and well maintained and marked roads to drive through to reach the rental tree adds much to the fun of a farm visit.

Someone must be available all during the growing and harvesting season to check tree renters in and out. This protects both parties to the agreement from unauthorized visitors.

Anyone who rents a fruit tree, becomes in effect, part of the farming operation. The pride of being a grower and possessing a bit of the countryside is attractive to many. This aspect of the agreement is often the part most highly valued by the renter. The fruit produced then becomes an added bonus. It should be plainly stated in the rental contract that no specific amount or quality of fruit is guaranteed. Hail, freezes, wind storms and excessive rain or drought are risks inherent in farming and are therefore assumed by the tree renter.

The tree rental fee is sometimes calculated using the expected production of the tree when sold at the going retail price. In this way the grower sells the farm privilege as part of the price for tree rental. Another way of arriving at a rental fee for a fruit tree is to take the expected production at the regular pick-your-own price, then add a farm privilege factor. In this way the renter of a small tree or one of a lower value variety would pay the same for the farm privilege as the renter of a tree with more or higher value fruit. It would be wise to move slowly into "rent-a-tree" so management problems can be fully assessed and policies developed to meet the various situations before or as they arise. Since the recreational value of renting a tree is perhaps the biggest consideration, the farm privilege can be, and sometimes is, sold separately, on a yearly basis. It then is used much as the membership in other recreational facilities such as a country club or yacht club.

Nearness to home will be a distinct advantage from a cost and travel time standpoint for the "rent-a-tree" customer. Areas remote from most potential customers will likely have less success. An exception would be a resort area where families and retired people own second homes and spend summer months. In this case, "rent-a-tree" could fill a recreational need and would be an added attraction for the area. Many untried possibilities for variations of the "rent-a-tree" concept will perhaps develop to combine the recreation business with fruit marketing in future years.



## RENT-A-GARDEN

This concept usually involves a plot of 500 to 2,000 square feet in size rented without any added services. Under these conditions the fee is usually quite low — often only \$5 to \$15 per year. Often these projects are city or community sponsored.

A commercial producer may also rent plots, including basic land preparation, basic fertilizer application, some seasonal cultivation and irrigation as needed. For these services, the charge is more than for land only. This arrangement, however, be more economical for the renter than doing these things for himself. The landlord may also make some added income from doing these services at one time on a volume basis for all his clients. Row spacings, in this instance, should be uniform and fit regular farm cultivator widths. Tall growing crops like corn and vine crops, such as cucumbers or squash, should use the same

rows in each plot so the cultivator can be used in low-growing or bush type plants longer during the growing season.

A written contract with rent-a-garden customers is a must to clarify rights and duties of both parties. A waterproof label in the garden to match a card carried by the renter can provide a means of checking persons in and out of the garden area. This also provides the necessary garden identification and helps avoid misunderstandings and hard feelings by produce being harvested from wrong plots. Friendly supervision and some helpful suggestions will go a long way to avoid problems.

Seeds, plants and other items needed by gardeners can also be sold. These, as well as pick-your-own produce from other parts of the farm, are additional sources of income. People who garden usually do home canning or freezing. If a fruit and vegetable

retail business is also operated, then canning and freezing supplies could create extra sales. Garden and canning supplies may offer a good potential in some situations and not in others. Low sales volume potential due to other convenient sources of supply may rule out this venture. In any case, it is well to move into this phase of the business cautiously. If a few items go well, more can be added later.

Rent-a-garden offers savings in food cost as well as the freshest possible produce. The satisfaction of "I grew it myself" as well as a healthful recreation activity are promotable sales pitches and should be utilized in advertising. As with rent-a-tree, the sales potential for rent-a-garden is not fully known at this time. Rent-a-garden potential must be carefully evaluated on individual locations. It may be a burden rather than an asset if management is spread too thin or other factors limit the usefulness of this marketing idea.

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