

07/10/2012

0710AGTOURISM

Camille Phillips

Picking fruit, tasting wine, petting a goat, roping a cow. When customers pay for the honor of taking on such farm chores...or delights...it's called agritourism. California, Texas and Colorado have the lion's share of this business. Now Midwestern states are planting the seeds to grow their agritourism industry. But as Harvest Public Media's Camille Phillips reports, for Midwest farmers it may not be a road to riches.

0710AGTOURISM

TRT: 5:30

SOC

For a tourist attraction to succeed, it helps if customers can find it.

Seba 1 "We're illegal to have anything on the road."

That's Renee Seba, the owner of Mule Barn Berries, in Lathrop, Missouri, just northeast of Kansas City. On this crisp sunny morning, she's telling a why there isn't a sign for Mule Barn Berries on the highway.

Ambi - "We're new enough still that we don't want to be stuck with what we put up...!"

This is the second year of operation for the u-pick blackberry patch. Seba and her husband Charlie are still figuring out how to make a go of it.

Last year they didn't have enough customers come out. With bushels of berries rotting on the vine, they scrambled to find other ways to sell their fruit.

Seba2

TRT:0:12

OC: panic moment

"My husband said, well call Lydia's restaurant. Or just call. Let's pack up fruit and take it to grocery stores and see if they'll buy anything. It was this panic moment."

Now they are better prepared, Seba says. Several area restaurants buy their berries, they've made arrangements to sell at more farmers markets, and as a last resort they can call gleaners to pick the remaining fruit. But u-pick is still the focus.

Seba3v2

TRT: 0:09

OC: when it's u-pick

"U-pick, everyone's happy. They come out, they have a great experience. I get to talk to people, which I really like...It's all win-win-win when it's u-pick."

Still, the Sebas aren't over the hump.

Seba4

TRT: 0:08

OC: well enough

"We hoped to be profitable by the end of this year, but that's not going to be reality. We spent too much money. Didn't budget well enough."

Even when the Sebas begin making a profit, odds are it won't be enough to make a living. Agritourism businesses in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Kansas brought in an average of \$12,300 in 2007. That's according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Ag. Census.

Still, policymakers in the Midwest are enthusiastic about the potential of agritourism. State governments and universities have websites, agencies and staff devoted to developing agritourism into an industry. Linda Craghead has been promoting agritourism in Kansas for 10 years. She now works for the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. The idea, she says, has been slow to catch on.

Craghead 1

TRT: 0:11

OC: embraced.

“It’s new. It’s new for Kansas. Even though we passed the law in 2004 to promote Kansas as an agritourism---as an industry, it’s not something people have just truly embraced...”

There are some pioneers – like Gieringer Orchards in Edgerton, Kansas, 30 miles from Kansas City.

Owner Frank Gieringer farms about 1000 acres and produces corn, soybeans and beef cattle – that’s his family’s primary source of income.

Ambi – wind in trees, perhaps quick comment about the peach trees.

But about ten years ago, Gieringer added a new crop—peaches—and invited people out to the orchard to pick. Today, he has 12 acres of peach trees, a couple of acres of blackberries, sweet corn and five hoop houses full of tomatoes and other vegetables. In addition to u-pick, Gieringer and his wife Melanie sell their produce at a country store on their property, and at several area farmers markets.

Inside the store, Gieringer explains that they found that the best way to get people out to their orchard is to hand out flyers at the farmers market. At the same time, their orchard is a big help in selling their produce at the market.

Gieringer1

TRT: 0:12

OC: grow their stuff

“But when we set up—we only sell what we grow. And we usually put up a u pick sign too, so people automatically key into the fact that well, they’ve got to grow their stuff.”

Selling their peaches directly to the consumer through u-pick and the farmers market enables the Gieringer’s to make a profit despite their relatively small orchard.

Another pioneer is Carolyn Raasch in Liberty, Missouri.

Ambi – Carolyn – this is our corn maze...

In 1991 she opened Carolyn's Country Cousins on her farm to sell the pumpkins and other produce she had been selling at a farmers market. That same year, a school asked if they could bring students out to see a farm. Now 17,000 schoolchildren tour their place each year.

Raasch1

TRT: 0:17

OC: all the time

“People used to be able to go to grandma’s and grandpa’s every weekend or aunt’s and uncle’s. And now, we are not one generation removed from the farm, we’re three and four generations removed from the farm. Some of them have never set foot on a farm and just played in the mud and played in the dirt.”

But their school tours offer a lot more than dirt! There's an animal barn, a pig race, a hay bale maze, a slide and jungle gym made of farm supplies, a train ride and to top it off: a u-pick pumpkin patch. Raasch's sons also operate a corn maze right next to Carolyn's Country Cousins.

One of the reasons agritourism appeals to farmers is that it takes advantage of the land, equipment and knowledge they already possess. Raasch and her husband Buddy farm full time, as do their two adult sons. They use the same farm equipment and expertise to plant their 8000 acres of row crops as they do to plant the 60 acre u-pick pumpkin patch and corn maze.

Raasch2

TRT: 0:10

OC: by far

“Would you say you make more money doing agritourism than the row crops?” “Oh no, Row crops is our number one income. Row crop is our number one income by far.”

Still, the attractions draw thousands of paying customers each year and employ 150 people each fall. That kind of success can create a ripple effect of economic growth in a rural community.

Linda Craghead -- with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism -- takes the potential even further – envisioning Kansas farms as vacation destinations.

Craghead2

TRT: 0:11

OC: very few.

“But there are so many people that want to experience what we do every day...How many people out there have really ever ridden on a combine? ...Very few.”

A family vacation milking cows or harvesting wheat may never have the appeal of Disneyland. But for the farmers that decide to branch out into agritourism, perhaps the opportunity to share their way of life is enough. Especially when it can help bring an influx of cash to their community and put a few extra thousand dollars in their pocket

I'm Camille Phillips for Harvest Public Media.

- 1. Get me a list of online elements, blog topic etc. .. a quiz even?**
 - a. Graphic comparing agritourism revenue in California, Texas, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri.**
 - b. Blog about agritourism liability**
 - c. Slideshow of photos from all three agritourism operations—maybe three separate slideshows?**