



## AGRITOURISM BEST PRACTICES

# Offering High-Quality On-Farm Experiences

“Agritourism blends two iconic industries of the state: both tourism and agriculture are valuable aspects of Vermont’s heritage. Agritourism provides economic resources to the state, education, local nourishment, and sustainable employment for Vermonters.”

— Megan Smith, Vermont Commissioner of Tourism & Marketing  
Farm to Plate Network Agritourism Task Force, June 2014

*While Vermont has always been known for producing high-quality farm products, today more than ever farmers are discovering innovative ways to diversify their farms, one of which is by offering agritourism activities. Visitors can spend time on a farm to experience agriculture and the working landscape. Agritourism is the sister industry to ecotourism. It answers tourists’ desires for experiences that connect them to the culture and story of a place.*

*Since every farm is unique, guests can visit farm after farm and always encounter something new. Activities on a single farm may change with the season, which makes the farm a continually fresh destination for the tourist. This chapter outlines many types of agritourism, and the qualities that successful agritourism farms share, including authenticity, safe environments and facilities, educational experiences, and strong customer service.*

## What’s Inside?

- Authenticity
- Safe Environments and Facilities
- Educational Experiences
  - Farmer-Led
  - Self-Guided
- Strong Customer Service

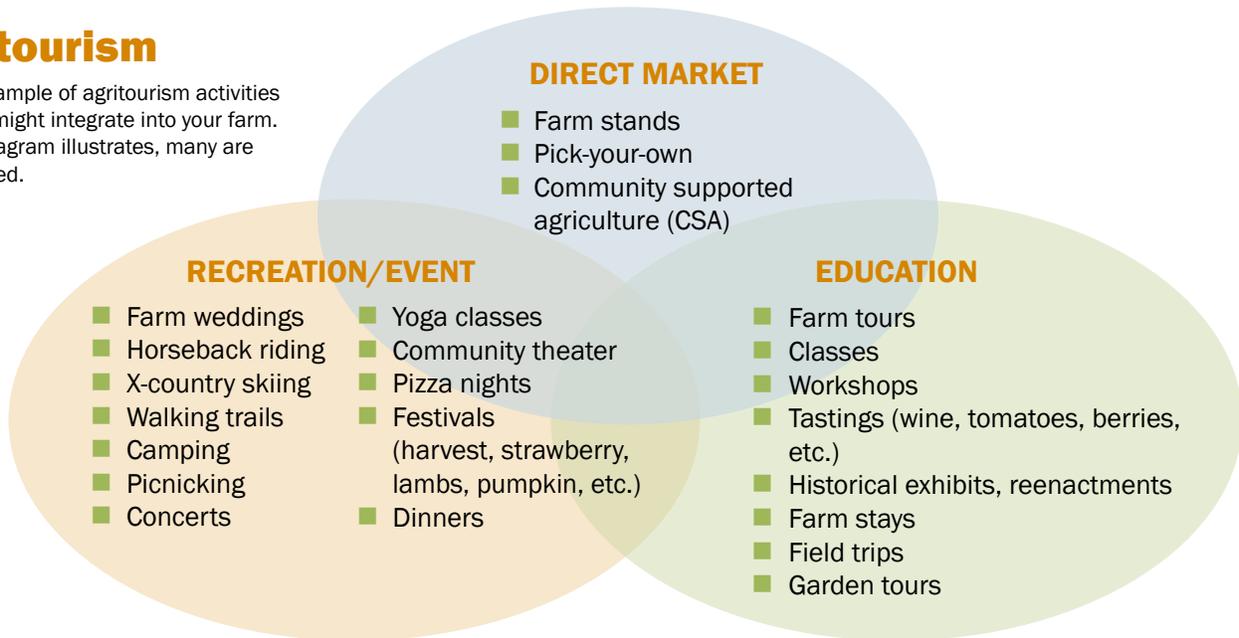
## Agritourism Defined

*The State of Vermont does not have a commonly accepted definition for agritourism, but many groups use this:*

Agritourism is the business of establishing farms as destinations for education, recreation, and the purchase of farm products. A farm visitor could be from a city far away, or a neighboring town. Examples of agritourism include farm tours, tastings, dinners-in-the-field, farm stays, workshops, festivals, and the direct sale of products through “pick-your-own,” community-supported agriculture, and many other avenues. Agritourism activities connect visitors to Vermont’s iconic working landscape.

## Agritourism

A small sample of agritourism activities that you might integrate into your farm. As this diagram illustrates, many are interrelated.



### Agritourism’s Role in a Farm Business

#### Supplementary Enterprise

Agritourism as a minor activity that supports other products on the farm.

#### Complementary Enterprise

Agritourism activities share equal footing with other enterprises in the farm’s product mix.

#### Primary Enterprise

Agritourism as the dominant/primary activity on the farm.

SOURCE: Rich, et al. *Agritourism: Opportunities for farm diversification*. North Carolina State University Extension, 2010.

### Top 3 reasons people vacation:

- to build and strengthen relationships
- to improve health and well-being
- to rest and relax

– University of California Small Farm Center

## Authenticity in Agritourism

In many places, “agritourism” activities could include a slide near a corn field, a farm gift shop where you can decorate animal-shaped cookies, and a blow-up pumpkin bouncy house near a pumpkin field. However, as the industry has grown throughout the United States, many farmers have remained committed to offering activities that authentically represent farming. One is more likely to find a Vermont farm offering agritourism as a supplement or complement to their farms, rather than as a primary enterprise.

Visitor experiences don’t have to be complicated. Guests will relish the opportunity to see a cow up close, hold a chicken, watch a pig take a nap, or taste a freshly picked carrot. All of these activities will influence how they understand farms and food, and how they value farms and farmers.

### Green Mountain Girls Farm

#### An Authentic Agritourism Experience

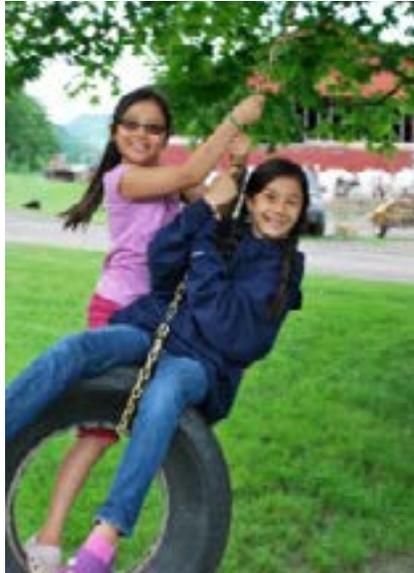


Green Mountain Girls Farm in Northfield, VT, offers a CSA, a full-diet farmstand, community activities in their barn, overnight accommodations and several activities that visitors can sign up for. “Step beyond our barnyard and into our farm operation. Join the learning adventure of farming via tours and hands-on farm experiences,” they write. Activities include cooking classes, cheesemaking classes, in-depth farmer-led tours, goat-milking assistant, welcoming the baby chicks, and more. Each is priced appropriately.

## Liberty Hill Farm

### An Authentic Agritourism Experience

Liberty Hill Farm and Inn in Rochester, VT, is a Cabot dairy farm that sells registered Holstein cows. In 1984, owners Bob and Beth Kennett opened their doors as a farm vacation destination. Liberty Hill Farm has welcomed guests from all 50 states and from around the world, many of whom return year after year. For the overnight guest, the day begins with a bountiful country breakfast and ends with a homemade, sit-down meal around the dining-room table. In between, guests can cuddle the barn kittens, collect eggs, chase chickens, and feed newborn calves. The Kennetts write, “By sharing the joys and challenges of farming life, we have seen our guests come to appreciate how closely our different ways of life intertwine. Each time a guest buys a product from an independent farm, whether cheese in the grocery store or fresh produce at a farmers’ market, they help sustain family farms.”



“Diversification into tours, U-pick operations, farm stores, pumpkin patches, agricultural festivals, and farm stands is not a substitute for a pro-family farm agenda. [However,] one of my fears is that if farmers and ranchers are too tardy in their response to this emerging opportunity, theme park operators will develop simulated farms and operate them as agritourism attractions.”

— Desmond Jolly, Former Director  
UC Davis Small Farm Program

Between 2007 and 2012, the number of Vermont farms involved in direct sales increased 41%. The number involved in agritourism increased 42%.

— NASS Census, 2012

## Safe Environments and Facilities



Vermont Grand View Farm, Washington, VT.

You should ensure that your property and facilities are well maintained and in compliance with zoning, health, and environmental regulations. It is useful as well to create a risk-management plan for your farm and keep in mind the Americans with Disabilities Act, which mandates equal customer access to certain facilities (entrances, exits, and bathrooms).

Be sure that your farm has adequate staff to provide necessary information to visitors, as well as the infrastructure for basic services such as parking, transportation, signage, and restrooms.

Tell your insurance agent about all the activities that you are offering, and make sure you have adequate coverage. For more information, read the “Safety and Risk Management” chapter in this series.

## Farmer’s Speak

### Why do you offer agritourism?

“We’re building a whole pie. The more agritourism activities in Vermont, the better it is for all of us. It attracts more people here.”

“To be less physical, more cerebral. That’s part of our goal as we age.”

“By putting a price on a farm experience, it starts to teach consumers that farmers are valuable.”

## Shelburne Vineyards

### Safe Agritourism Practices: Zoning

When Ken and Gail Albert first shared their plans for a winery in Shelburne, town staff understood that with the full range of uses contemplated for the site, it would not qualify as an agricultural operation only. Ken Albert had thoughtfully explained that it would be at least three years before grapes on the site would mature, so more than 51% of the fruit used to make the wine would not be “principally produced on farm.” This meant the vineyard would not be exempt from Act 250 permitting. Another challenge was that local zoning regulations did not allow commercial activities on the site, and the Alberts and their partner Scot Prom had envisioned that the visitor area of the winery would sell non-agricultural products and that the property would be ideal to host special events.

So, over a period of a few months, the Alberts, planning commissioners, town staff, and community members discussed revising the zoning regulations to authorize agriculture-related development as a conditional



use. In time, the concept of allowing “integrated agriculture” (a hybrid land use directly related to farming activities), gained acceptance. By allowing integrated agriculture, the town found a way to encourage agriculture-related enterprises while at the same time safeguarding the community against negative impacts. The zoning regulations were amended by vote of the selectboard. Shortly

thereafter, the Alberts applied for approval from the town’s development review bodies. The project was approved, and Shelburne Vineyard today stands as proof that local communities and agriculturalists can find fair and innovative ways to address important land use concerns.

— Dean Pierce, Director of Planning and Zoning, Shelburne, VT Town Planner

## Sandiwood Farm

### Safe Agritourism Practices: Dining



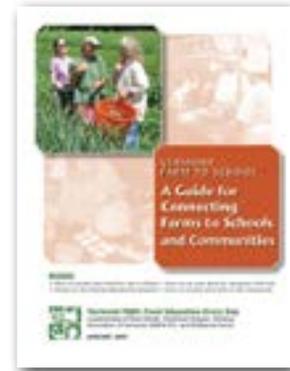
At Sandiwood Farm in Wolcott, VT, owners Sara and Bob Schlosser have taken many twists and turns since they started farming 25 years ago, but they remain committed to growing food for their community and welcoming people to the farm for farm-to-fork sunset dinners. The year 2012 marked the start of their long-planned transition to agritourism, and over three years they have honed the visitor experience. One of the most impressive parts of their dinner is their staff-to-visitor ratio. Sara and Bob collaborate with their two kids, Chef

Sandi and Kyle, and employ at least 10 community members who guide guests into parking spots, chat with them as they pass hors d’oeuvres, and help them find their seats, the Port-O-Let, the rows of cover crops, or anything else they’re interested in learning about. For dinner, they serve incredible food prepared by Chef Sandi of Vermont Harvest Catering. By using a caterer (in this case, their daughter), the meals also comply with the Vermont Department of Health. They also have a licensed bartender who serves alcohol at a cash bar.

## Educational Experiences: Farmer-Led

Your farm is a classroom, and as the farmer, you are in a unique position to interpret all that happens on your farm to the public. At any given location on your property, there are lessons in weather, microorganisms, history, soil, water, plant species, and farm products. You can teach guests about your farm through group or customized tours, field trips, workshops, tastings, and more. When working with guests of any age, keep these tips in mind.

- Guests will love seeing, hearing, smelling, but above all *tasting* your farm. Fresh product may be the most significant memory they leave with. Tasting products can be a simple or complex process (caramel on a popsicle stick or a caramel paired with other local or exotic products).
- Set the tone when you first meet with your guests. What will they see? Where is the restroom located? How long will they be on their feet?
- When possible, organize your visitor experiences sequentially, so it's easy for guests to follow the processes you are describing. When they get home, will they be able to explain to a friend how your product is made or how your animals are raised?
- Instead of giving all the information, have guests come up with it themselves. Asking questions will encourage guests to think and discover on their own and will help you assess their level of knowledge. For example, you might say, "This is complicated milking parlor machinery. How do you think it works?" Let them think for a few seconds, then give a hint or two if there is no response. If you have trouble creating thought-provoking questions, try putting "why" or "how" in front of almost any statement to help change it into a question. "What would happen if..." is also a useful phrase for the start of a question.
- Remember the "teachable moment." If the guests' attention is diverted to the manure spreader in the field, stop what you're doing and talk about it.



Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day) has a comprehensive guide on connecting farms and schools. Free download: [Guide for Connecting Farms to Schools & Communities](#)

## Crooked Mile Cheese

### Educational Experiences

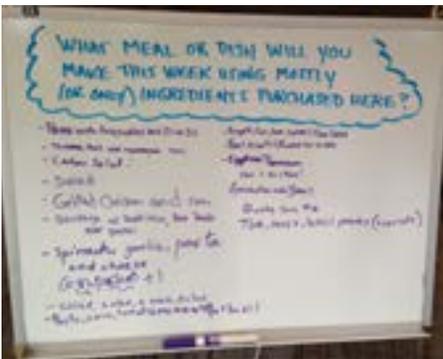
Roberta Gillot of Crooked Mile Cheese hosts tours by appointment at her small farm and creamery in Waterford, VT. After guests park, Gillot starts the tour by showing them the goat kids. Following a well-worn path, the tour winds from the goat kids to the small barn that used to house a farmer's four jersey cows, and today serves as winter housing for Gillot's does. The milking room is next, where Gillot milks two at a time using a bucket milker. After that, she shows her creamery — possibly the tiniest creamery in Vermont — where a mix of stainless steel equipment and humming coolers fascinates anyone who is partial to the scientific side of food production. Finally, the path leads to a rocky pasture where the does play "king of the mountain" and watch visitors. Roberta's tour can take all of 10 minutes or be expanded to an hour and 10 minutes.



Whichever version she leads, guests leave with a picture of what small-scale, one-woman cheese production looks like. They understand the sequence from birth to cheese, the inputs and outputs, and they have a greater appreciation for hand-crafted Vermont goat cheese.



Someday Farm in East Dorset, VT, tucks activities into mailboxes around the property. (Vera Simon-Nobes)



Staff members at the Killdeer Farm Stand in Norwich, VT, write a question on a dry erase board each day. Customers answer it. (Vera Simon-Nobes)



An interpretive walk at Spring Brook Farm, Reading, VT. (Vera Simon-Nobes)

## Educational Experiences: Self-Guided

Educational experiences don't have to be delivered from person to person. Here are just a few examples of how some farmers educate their visitors through self-guided opportunities:

- At Someday Farm in East Dorset, VT, farmer Scout Proft has a series of mailboxes around her property. When her farm members visit, they can find farm-related activities inside plastic bags in the mailboxes. This system allows the farmers to continue to work while guests can engage with the farm and learn.
- At the Killdeer Farm Stand in Norwich, VT, the staff writes a question on a dry erase board each day, and customers can answer it. This is a fun, interactive activity that keeps things fresh and keeps information flowing.
- At Fat Toad Farm in Brookfield, VT, farmer Judith greets guests then hands out a map. Guests can find their way along a goat path to the milking parlor and caramel room, or see the bucks and does in the pastures.
- At Spring Brook Farm in Reading, VT, an interpretive walk through the woods gives hikers reason to pause and take in the setting.

There are many tools for self-guided education:

- Interpretive signage
- Captioned photographs on walls
- Signs along a path with facts about your farm
- Activities like scavenger hunts
- Color wheel matching activities (i.e., find flowers that match the colors)

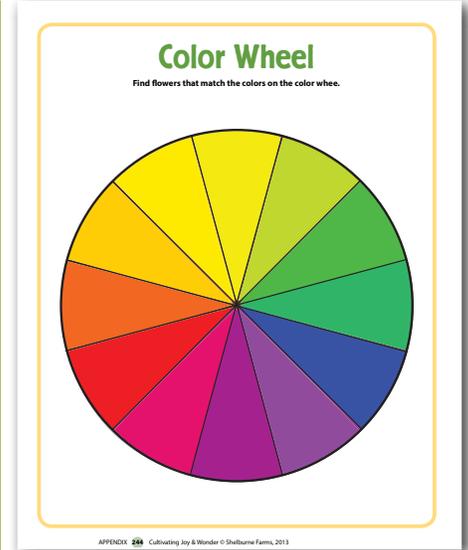


At Fat Toad Farm in Brookfield, VT, guests are sent out to explore with a map.

**MOTION, MUSIC & MANNERISMS: A Farm Animal Scavenger Hunt**

MOTION	MUSIC	MANNERISMS	ANIMAL PRODUCTS	MYSTERY
An animal that is walking 	A chicken "clucking" 	An animal chewing its cud 	Fleece from the sheep 	A tool to brush the coat 
An animal moving quickly 	A sheep "baaaing" 	An animal drinking 	Feather duster 	A salt lick 
An animal that is swimming 	A pig "oinking" 	An animal sleeping 	Manure 	A sign that tells you not to touch the fence! 
An animal moving on 2 legs 	An insect "buzzing" 	An animal scratching itself 	An egg 	A tool to move manure 
An animal moving on 4 legs 	A farmer "talking" 	An animal eating hay 	Milk 	A wheelbarrow 

APPENDIX 233 Cultivating Joy & Wonder © Shelburne Farms, 2013  
Illustrations: Holly Brough



Scavenger hunt and color wheel from *Cultivating Joy & Wonder: Educating for Sustainability in Early Childhood Through Nature, Food, and Community*. Shelburne Farms, 2013.



Chalkboard question and answer at Drumlin Farm Wildlife Sanctuary, Lincoln, MA. (Vera Simon-Nobes)

### Looking for educational resources?

The Farm-Based Education Network is a free member network established to strengthen and support the work of educators, farmers, and community leaders who are providing access and experiences of all kinds on productive, working farms. The FBEN can connect you with farm-based education resources.

There are also many helpful websites, publications, and workshops. For starters:

- [Farm-Based Education Network](#)
- [Life Lab](#)
- [Edible Schoolyard Network](#)
- [National Farm to School Network](#)
- *Project Seasons: Hands-On Activities for Discovering the Wonder of the World*. Shelburne Farms
- *Cultivating Joy and Wonder: Educating for Sustainability in Early Childhood through Nature, Food and Community*. Shelburne Farms ([download it for free](#))
- VT FEED's free, downloadable guide [Connecting Farms to Schools and Communities](#)
- Shelburne Farms farm-based education workshops. See their [calendar](#).

"Agritourism is a critical component to the ongoing growth of our agriculture and food systems economies. Our partners in the tourist industry help to showcase our great ag and food entrepreneurs and the wide range of quality products that are the foundation of Vermont's strong brand reputation."

— Chuck Ross, Vermont Secretary of Agriculture  
Farm to Plate Network Agritourism Task Force,  
June 2014

A satisfied customer will tell four or five others about a pleasant experience. It costs three to five times more to replace a lost customer than to keep one.

— Nick Wreden  
 “How to Recover Lost Customers,” smartbiz.com

REFERENCES: “Strong Customer Service” from “Agritourism in Focus: A Guide for Tennessee Farmers,” University of Tennessee Extension.

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## Also in this series

### Best Practices in...

- Assessing Your Farm for Agritourism
- Land Use and Zoning for Agritourism
- Business and Financial Planning
- Safety and Risk Management
- Marketing

### How To...

- Host Dinners on Your Farm
- Host Summer Camp on Your Farm
- Host Weddings on Your Farm
- Develop a Farm Stand
- Develop a Farm Stay
- Develop a Pick-Your-Own Business
- Develop a Tour on Your Farm

Download at [www.uvm.edu/vtagritourism](http://www.uvm.edu/vtagritourism)

## Strong Customer Service

Customer service is exhibited both in the way you present your farm and in how you treat visitors. If you have paid staff members, they are likely your biggest expense, but also your greatest asset. Training your staff to interact with customers in an informed and helpful way will ensure a safe, high-quality experience for customers. It also ensures these customers will return and tell other potential customers about your business. Your staff should understand your farming practices and be prepared to answer all sorts of questions. *Why do you dock tails? Why does it smell? Why do the sheep have to be fenced? Where is the farmer? Where is the closest cafe?*

“There is no more important factor to retail success than a friendly, happy, knowledgeable, efficient/proficient staff.”

— Scott Woolsey  
 Retail and Customer Service Manager  
 Killdeer Farm and Farm Stand, Norwich, VT

Whether you’re a one-person operation or you manage staff, developing a customer service plan will be helpful. Your plan should address the following:

- **Customer Needs, Wants and Expectations:** Find out what services your customers need, want, and expect to receive from your enterprise. Consider surveying customers, interviewing or holding focus groups, asking employees about their observations on customer needs, and tracking customer comments and complaints.
- **Customer Service Goals and Objectives:** Establish goals and objectives for your enterprise based on the needs, wants, and expectations identified above.
- **Customer Service Policies:** Develop policies for your enterprise that encourage employees to display a positive attitude, keep facilities neat, treat each customer like a VIP, and handle complaints appropriately.
- **Employee Training Policies:** Train employees to implement your customer service policies.
- **Customer Service Evaluation:** Evaluate the effectiveness of your customer service plan and make changes where needed.

*As you identify what activities to offer on your farm, it will be important to stay flexible, assess your progress, and adapt as you gain experience. Keep good records on attendance, expenses, and receipts; how customers learn about you; and, of course, your overall well-being. Do your program offerings help you reach one of your farm’s goals? What do you most enjoy about guests, and what do guests most enjoy about your farm? Ask yourself these questions and more as you plan for visitors.*