

"Fruits each in its season, are the cheapest, most elegant and wholesome dessert you can offer your family or friends, at luncheon or tea. Pastry and plum-pudding should be prohibited by law, from the beginning of June until the end of September."

~ Mary Virginia Terhune

Welcome to Vintage AMericana, exploring and restoring rural American culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is episode 66: You can pick 'em. Today we're going to talk about U-pick farms.

Before we get started, I invite you to stop by the blog at brambleberry meadow.com and check things out there. Sign up for the e-mail newsletter, and explore some of the recipes there for your Summer bounty. Thanks!

Today's topic is one that fits into our discussion from a couple of different angles. First, it's early Summer, and the first flush of harvest season is on us. There are lots of things available at this time of year whose season is very short. Second, U-pick farms are an ideal enterprise for rural areas, rather equivalent to local shops in a more urban setting. Let's talk about them from both sides.

U-pick farms are a great way to stock up on produce - usually fruit - at less expense than purchasing at a grocery store or farmer's market. Largely because you're investing your time. I have a number of them that I frequent. I'll share first why I love U-picks, and how to choose one.

Even though I intend to eventually have a wide variety of fruit planted myself, most types are a longer term investment. You don't sow the seeds in the Spring with the expectation of harvesting fruit in the fall. On the other hand, most fruits are perennial - meaning you'll pick fruit from your trees or bushes for years to come. Or, someone else's plants.

U-pick farms are an excellent way to lay in a large supply of a fruit to process all at once. So, while I might get a quart or two off my own raspberry bushes every few days, I can go to a U-pick farm and pick a whole flat in one morning.

I've also visited farms that grow a fruit or a particular variety I'm thinking about planting, but want to try, first.

For instance, last year I went and picked a few pints of Saskatoons and a few pints of Honeyberries. I discovered that I like both, although I prefer the honeyberries. I did chat with the owner while I was there, and got a good idea of the varieties of honeyberries he's planted and what he likes and doesn't like about them both in terms of growth habits. Plus I got to taste and compare the two varieties.

Another advantage to U-pick is that your fruit is undeniably fresh. Even farmer's market fruit often was picked the day before and refrigerated. While that's not a deal killer, fresher is always better when you can manage it. I've even picked strawberries at a friend's on my lunch hour, and by the time I got home in the evening some of the berries on the bottom of the baskets were starting to go a little off.

Plus, you're less likely to have crushed fruit in the bottom of the containers. Picking yourself, transporting directly home reduces the propensity to crush and bruise fruit in transit. This is especially important with very fragile fruit like raspberries and cherries.

Sometimes picking a U-pick farm is easy. I know of exactly one within an hours' drive that has honeyberries or saskatoons. Yep, I'll be headed back this year. (Probably in a week or two).

Sometimes its quite a bit harder. I live in striking distance of an area known as "The Fruit Ridge." And I'm I the very midst of blueberry country. There are so many U-pick apple orchards, cherry orchards, blueberry farms, and pumpkin patches, that it's a genuine embarassment of riches. So - how to choose?

First, check the logistics. what days is the farm open? Or at least, what days are they picking? I've had to exclude farms from my list because they are closed on my day off, or were so overpicked as to need to restrict picking the day I meant to go.

Second, check their rules. Most are pretty consistent. No pets, etc. Others will sometimes limit the size of parties allowed to pick. Some will charge a per-person fee, while others will only charge for the fruit you pick. A few will prohibit large bags or purses, and may even reserve the right to search the. Make sure you know and are OK with those rules or find another farm.

Third, what are the prices charged. Make sure you have a good idea of how much you want to pick, and what that looks like. Do you know what ten pounds of cherries looks

like? How many jars you'll need to can a lug of them? If the farm charges by the pound for berries, but you're picking into a quart basket, do you know how much a quart is likely to weigh? Also, be sure you are familiar with what method of payment the farm accepts? Not all of them can process credit cards, for example. You'll be expected to buy all the fruit you pick, so plan accordingly.

And finally, do they have a phone line or an online way to check picking conditions before you leave home? Many farms will have a "ripe and ready" report. This can save you a wasted trip, if the raspberries got overpicked the day before and need a few days before more are ripe. Or, you might adjust your trip date if you want a specific variety of apple.

What should you bring with you on your outing? Start with the basics for any outdoor activity: water, sunscreen, bug spray. Some U-picks allow (and encourage!) picnicking, so if that's on your list check the rules and pack lunch. Others will have a food stand available.

Check their information - or even call and ask - about whether they provide containers or if you need to bring your own. Some require you to bring something to pick in - others forbid it. If you ARE bringing your own containers, choose some appropriate to the task. Usually you should go for smaller containers. It will make it easier to hold them as you pick. And easier to carry around. Although multiple small containers can get hard to juggle. Something to carry your containers IN can be a good idea, too.

I find the pressed green fiber quart baskets to be ideal for all soft fruits. You can save them from your produce purchases, or buy new ones. They're not hard to find on sites like Etsy or from dedicated berry supply businesses. The flat boxes are a bit more elusive, but you can probably find those, too, if you look around. I'm less fond of the wooden boxes, as I find small fruits like blueberries sometimes fall out of the corners. And soft fruits get damaged by them - even very ripe strawberries sometimes don't fare well in those.

You can pick into almost any container. But try to stick with shallower vessels. As you fill your container, sometimes the weight of the fruit actually crushes the lower sections. Blueberries and cherries can be robust enough to pick into a 5 lb bucket, but most other soft fruits should be handled more gently.

Large tree fruit like apples, pears, and peaches are easier to pick into large containers. I don't think you can beat the old one peck baskets, and they aren't hard to find. Orchards will often provide sized bags, as well. Those are great for apples, although they have a tendency to bruise peaches. Be gentle.

U-pick farm etiquette:

Remember most of these places are small farms, so you're really visiting someone's home and backyard. Behave accordingly.

Be exceedingly gentle with the plants and trees. Broken branches and canes translate into decreased production for the farm. Or even the potential entry point for diseases and loss of a tree.

If you bring your children, keep them right by you. They can, unintentionally, damage plants as well. Or knock over someone else's picked fruit in their enthusiasm. If they are going to pick fruit, make sure they understand how to do so properly. A child picking all the green strawberries, then dropping them back into the plants, is depriving a future picker of fruit and the farmer of income.

Go where the farm tells you to go, and pick there. Often, they're trying to manage their crop in the optimal fashion. Don't move ladders unless you have been told that you may. You could break off a limb on a tree if you don't know how to place them properly.

Especially when berry-picking, take your time and pick ALL the berries in your section as you go. Don't just grab the easy ones and move on. This makes it much more difficult for the person picking behind you. And it also makes it much more difficult for the farm to estimate how many berries are left in each portion of the field when they are deciding how many more people can pick that day.

If you are unsure of how to judge the ripeness of the fruit, or how best to pick without damaging, ASK. The staff will be happy to share their best tips and tricks. And they'll be gratified that you care enough about their livelihood to treat it with respect.

Assess your time commitment, before you go. Do you have TIME to can two lugs of cherries within a day or two of picking? Do you have the materials at home to process the fruit? I've canned 40 lbs of sweet cherries in one day, with nothing but a hairpin to

pit them with, and I can't say that I recommend it. I now make sure I have a pitter, jars, lids, sugar, pectin, and anything else I might feel I need before I go. Especially in the current environment, when jars, lids, and pectin have sometimes been in short supply.

Don't leave any of your trash behind at the farm from picking. I suggest bringing a small trash bag in your car, as well as some wet wipes or towels for clean up. And more water.

It won't take you too many visits to decide which farms are your favorites. Once you've found them, support them. Share their info on social media during the season. Bring friends. Do your best to help them succeed, so that they're there for you next year.

Because, as we now get into the other half of our conversation, U-pick farms are an important element of building a local economies in rural areas.

I've mentioned recently that I've been spending a lot of time reading and listening to the information being provided by Strong Towns and Charles Marohn. Much of the emphasis he puts on returning decision making and the drivers of the economy into local hands resonates for me. It's just going to look different in a rural setting.

There are lots of small businesses that are well-suited to rural areas. And Upick farms are particularly valuable. why? First, they help preserve the rural character of the community. A farm is a farm, after all. And a better use of land than a subdivision for most areas. Second, they help attract quite a few people into the area. These folks may also patronize cafes, ice cream parlors, or small shops while they're in town. Third, they're relatively low-impact, in terms of infrastructure. Most Upick operations are very seasonal. That means that parking on gravel or even grass is reasonable, because it won't be constant, year round use that will start to create ruts and damage. There will be lots of time for those areas to recover before next year.

Economically, they can be a fairly low investment business to start. You need the plants, some irrigation, perhaps some support and pest control. And some labor during the picking season. But it doesn't require the hiring of large numbers of people to pick all the ripe fruit for market - your customers are paying for the privilege of doing that themselves.

Upick also allows for some experimentation. Take, for example, the farm where I pick

honeyberries and saskatoons. Those are two fruits that are very minor, and rather new to the American market. It will be a while before a steady commercial demand develops. So, while there might not be too many local supermarkets that are interested in carrying them, there are enough interested folks to come out and pick. Those people will also talk about these delicious new berries, raising curiosity from others. More bushes can be planted as demand increases.

U-picks are also very scalable. What may start as a U-pick apple orchard might gradually expand their offerings. First, a couple acres of pumpkins, so your apple customers can also get a pumpkin for Halloween. Perhaps some hayrides on the weekends. Or a petting zoo. Maybe that next slope would be perfect for cherry or peach trees, expanding the season into the Summer.

Fruit picking, in our modern world, is as much an event or outing as it is a way to get food. Some farms capitalize on that, and add a market, or even a full blown event center. I know of at least one that has an old barn that is now converted into a wedding venue. A simple gazebo in one of the fields surrounded by orchards, with wooden benches, and you've got another stream of income.

There is a lot of conversation lately about the great rural exodus, or brain drain, or hollowing out. Much of the reason for this is the lack of good jobs to be found in tiny places across the Heartland. Combined with the fact that industrial agriculture does not allow much opportunity for entry-level positions that lead to any kind of ownership.

Many a young couple has regretfully sold the family land and moved elsewhere, in search of work. The "old homestead" of one side of my family has since been sold for development. A few old farm buildings remain, adding "rustic charm" to the subdivision and condo community that now marches across that landscape with depressing sameness.

The township has acquired an ongoing infrastructure bill that the tax base from the homes there won't support. And even before it was finished, the crash of 2008 started to impede the plan to finish all the homes within it. It's location, right along a highway, but not all that near the on-ramp, makes it less desirable to live in than marketing might have you think.

Consider instead what might have been for 80 acres that had not been developed in that

way. The location would have been, in many ways, ideal for a U-pick farm. Easily accessible, and visible from the highway. Had there BEEN any younger members of the family available to take possession of it, the transition could have happened over time. Planting trees. Some berry bushes. Making the orchards available to local photographers for photo sessions (at a small charge to the photographer) would both advertise the farm and provide some off-season income.

Occasionally, these sorts of enterprises are killed early by neighbors or zoning that prohibits the traffic, parking, or "commercial enterprise". But this is short-sighted in both instances. The small farm will create less traffic than 100 new families in a subdivision. And also be a net gain for the township, financially, rather than a net loss.

Plus, the orchards and berry fields are more attractive on the landscape, preserving the rural character.

An enterprising orchard might add a line of hard ciders. And I know of more than one that partners with another fruit farm for blended ciders. I don't know about you, but I AM fond of a good blueberry cider.

Thus far, I've pretty much concentrated on fruit farms. But those are by no means the only U-pick enterprises. For whatever reason, I don't happen across too many U-pick vegetable farms locally. Possibly because people don't view it as an outing, and also don't often pick in such large quantities.

However, there ARE a few U-pick flower farms. Personally, I find this very brave on the part of the flower farmer, given how fragile some types can be. But there are apparently ways to make it work. Flower farms are another scalable business. They, too, can often provide wedding and event venues. Also classes on flower arranging. Sales of arrangements or even full floral services.

And, of course, there is always the "U Cut Christmas Tree Farm." This is a bit of a longer term plan, just because of the time and effort required to bring a tree from seedling to harvest size. Although I can highly recommend "Carving Out a Living on the Land" by Emmet Van Dreische for both a practical and philosophical plan for running such a farm by using a coppicing technique.

When my oldest daughter was quite young, I remember visiting a Ucut farm. We didn't

actually buy a tree - because we lived in a small apartment and had no where to put it. But the farm in question also provided horse-drawn sleigh rides, hot cocoa, a market full of freshly made wreaths and greenery - the whole holiday experience. I'd go back, were it still there.

Now, you might regard it as a poor recommendation that the farm is gone. But I would point out that it mostly succumbed to a major market crash in Christmas tree prices good decade and a half ago. Which happened as previously HIGH prices caused everybody and their brother to plant Scotch pines - and then flood the market such that prices crashed.

All of which rather DOES underscore my point about diversification.

What other ways can a small U-pick option diversify? It's never a BAD idea to keep a small flock of sheep. They can mow the orchard in the Summer, and generally help with maintaining a healthy farm ecosystem. Plus, if you get the right breed of sheep, and take some care in maintaining their fleece, you can sell that as well. Or, send it out to be processed into roving, top, or yarn. Now you've got a few more things to sell in your on farm shop.

Consider hosting a little festival. If you make a bit of a name for yourself with the hand-spinning and knitting crowd, you can probably invite them out to your farm to sell their wares and even do some demonstrations of spinning and knitting.

You should, by now, be getting the idea that the possibilities are nearly endless. And they are. Rural communities also need to get back into the habit of thinking on a human scale. The economics of agriculture is such that, for instance, someone growing commodity crops or milking 900 cows will have a great deal of difficulty leaving, say, 500 acres even to ONE child to continue on. The moreso if he has 4 kids, and the one who wants to take over the farm would have to compensate the other 3.

BUT - split that 500 acres into 125 or so to each of the kids (presuming they all want to stay in their small community). Each one would have land enough for a house, and to start a small, blended business. Maybe they've all got day jobs, at least for now, nearby. But in the meantime are putting in the start of an orchard. Or a berry farm. Or some Christmas trees. Starting a small flock of heritage sheep. Or pigs. Or a grass fed dairy.

They can share around their resources. Let the pigs run the orchard during the June drop and clean up the fallen apples - better pork, plus less pest control needed in the orchard. One starts an event venue, and hosts "farm to table" dinners by a local chef - using produce from siblings' farms. One adds a small photography studio, and also does outdoor shoots on sibling's properties, too. Another builds a cottage for her in-laws to live in, that is later converted into housing for a farm manager as the operation grows.

Look what happened for the community:

500 acres were removed from the extractive process of industrial agriculture. And the recovery process for the land begins and continues as it instead is managed for the long term.

Four small businesses begin, adding to the tax base in the community, with very little increased demand for infrastructure. Each is smart enough to diversify, and each brings a different segment of visitors to the community. New enterprises might be able to piggy back onto this increased traffic.

The community also has better access to local food and local products. Plus a reason to stay closer to home more often, as there are more things to do. Local dollars spend more time spinning around before being sent out to the hedge funds or oligarchs that own huge national chains. So neither the soil nor the wealth of the community is being extracted as quickly.

Keeping that 500 acres in the hands of people who love their place and understand that the health of the soil is the basis for the health of their community simultaneously prevented 4 new subdivisions. Or Walmarts. Or Industrial parks from being built. All of which WOULD extract a lot of the wealth from the community while simultaneously requiring expensive infrastructure that drains resources from municipalities.

Have we seen enough yet of the global economy to understand that not everything must or even should be done at the largest possible scale? Quality of life is improved when things are brought down to human-sized pieces.

It's time to stop treating the interior of the country as one giant resource, to be exploited in order to feed a globalized urban culture hungry for ever more and cheaper goods.

Time, instead, to love our places. To see them as good, in and of themselves. And to find the ways and means to make meaningful livings in them.

Upick farms and market stands hit all the requirements for things that are "good" for a local neighborhood. They are scalable. Flexible. Adaptable. And human-scaled. Think about that. And go pick some strawberries this weekend.

In my tiny corner of the world, the berries won't really be ready till next week. So, in the meantime, I think I'll go make sure I have my berry baskets ready. And get some jar lids and pectin. Are you coming?