



May 2010

California AgTour Connections

Agritourism News & Notes

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Greetings!

As the weather warms, city and suburban people make plans to get out of town and experience rural life; many are looking for farms and ranches to visit. Travelers are using the internet in new ways to decide where to go. Farmers and ranchers are using new marketing and education tools to connect with these urban travelers.

This issue explores some online tools, and shares some agritourism news and tips. Our online directory has a new look and a new event calendar for you to use, new online Geotourism maps offer easy interaction on many levels, a U-pick farmer posts to his Google group when the berries are ripe, online field trip booking saves staff time, and mountain ranchers create videos to educate public officials about their good stewardship of the land.

It's great to talk with you again. We were busy this last month completing grant applications (see below for some good news) and moving the [Small Farm Program](#) office into a new building on the UC Davis campus. Thanks for staying in touch and sharing your stories and news.

Sincerely,
Penny Leff, UC Small Farm Program agritourism coordinator

CalAgTour.org directory new look & features

Add your agritourism operation and public events today

Check out the directory's [new look!](#) The UC Small Farm Program hosts a searchable online directory of California's agricultural tourism operations, for use by visitors looking for a farm or ranch to visit. The directory is located at www.CalAgTour.org.



Thanks to careful work by Mike Poe, Karl Krist, and the crew at UC ANR Communications Services, the directory website (including the database that backs it up) has been redesigned for clearer listing and searching. It now includes an [event calendar](#) that you can use to list your public events, festivals, classes, farm tours, and all that good stuff for visitors. You can also upload a picture to go with your event listing. Over the next month, we'll be brightening the look and content of the main pages of the site. Your suggestions are very welcome.

If you are a working farmer or rancher operating an agritourism

business or organizing agritourism events, we invite you to complete the [directory application](#) or the [event listing application](#) online so we can include your business and events in the directory. If you're already listed, please [check your listing](#) and update it if needed. You can use the [directory application](#) form for updates. We'll contact you if we have any questions.

Please take a look and tell us what else you'd like to see as part of the new CalAgTour.org.

Agritourism professional development

Small Farm Program funded to organize workshops this winter



The UC Small Farm Program proposal for organizing regional train-the-trainer workshops for agritourism operators and agricultural professionals has been selected for funding by Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education ([WSARE](#)). If funds are released as expected, we'll be offering six series' of two in-depth workshops, beginning in November 2010, teaching professionals to share agritourism business-planning, risk management, marketing and development skills.

We hope to work with many of you this fall, along with experienced members of the Ag and Nature Tourism Workgroup, to plan these workshops, and to strengthen our regional networks by involving people from several counties in organizing and being part of each of the six regional workshop series'.

For more information, contact [Penny Leff](#), 530.752.7779.

Get on the Geotourism Map!

National Geographic teams up with locals for interactive fun



[Geotourism](#) is the latest way to travel; geotourists can now include your farm or ranch's

agritourism activity as part of the journey when they plan an authentic enriching travel experience. If you're anywhere in the North Coast area or the Sierra Nevada and foothills region, you can put your farm or ranch on the geotourism map as part of one of the new National Geographic Interactive Mapguides, one for California's greater [Redwood Coast](#) region, and one for the [Sierra Nevada](#).

The National Geographic Society has [partnered](#) with the Sierra Nevada conservancy and the Sierra Business Council for the Sierra map project, and with a long list of [collaborators](#) for the redwood coast project.

It's easy to add content to the sites, whether it's your own operation, your group's event or your favorite hiking trail or community park. You might even find that someone has already put your farm or ranch on the map! Click [here](#) to submit content for the Sierra Nevada map, or [here](#) to participate in the redwood coast map.

Making the Farm Connection

New farm field trip guide for farmers from CAFF

Do you invite school field trips to your farm or ranch? Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) has created a new manual designed to let farmers know what to expect when hosting a farm visit. This booklet is also very useful for teachers and classes so that they get the most out of their farm visit. The manual is available for download from CAFF's useful [farm-to-school](#) program website. For more information about the program, contact [Ildi Carlisle-Cummins](#), (831) 761-8507.



Farmers and ranchers operating education programs might also find some useful resources and connections through the [Farm-Based Education Association](#), an organization that strengthens and supports the work of educators and administrators providing access to their productive working farms. Although members are primarily from the Eastern half of the U.S., many of the ideas shared are universal.

U-pick: Sweet fruit and memories for sale

Participation is a hit at Pacific Star Garden's retail farm



When Robert and Debbie Ramming took over the family's 40 acre Yolo County organic farm and started [Pacific Star Gardens](#) 16 years ago, they planned to grow for the wholesale market. After a few experiences watching ripe fruit spoil when the few big buyers didn't need any that week, the Ramming's decided that "retail farming" gave them the control they needed over their sales and pricing.

In early years as retail farmers, Robert, Debbie and their son Adam drove to 22 farmers' markets a week in 3 rented trucks with their crop of melons, tomatoes and other row crops. This year they will sell at six of the best local markets, accounting for about half of the farm's income. The other half of income will come from on-farm sales, split about evenly between U-pick (strawberries, blackberries and apricots) and farm-stand sales of these fruits along with tomatoes, melons and vegetables. While farmers' market sales were off by about 20 percent last year, on-farm sales held steady.

Who picks how much? - On a good Saturday in May, 2 or 3 dozen families will pick about 40 gallon buckets of Chandler strawberries from the 3/4 acre patch, bringing in about \$500 in sales. Pacific Star Gardens is between Woodland and Davis, and most customers come from these towns, although a few drive from as far away as San Francisco. Most families will pick a gallon or two, paying \$12 a mounded gallon, the equivalent of about 6 heaped baskets. They can pay \$15 for a ready-picked gallon or \$2.75 for a basket at the stand, but these will be flat, not piled high. Apricots ripen in May and June. Ripe in June and July, blackberries are sold only by the basket.

Marketing through prepaid membership - About 100 families have signed up as "members" of the farm. Members can prepay \$50 for

the right to pick fruit or pick from the vegetable patch on the honor system. Each member's account is kept on an index card, and the members leave notes, not cash, when they pick, listing what they take each visit. The Ramblings or a helper then deduct the amount picked from the member's account. This allows a safe, unstaffed, off-season and mid-week U-pick operation when the farm is not open to the public. However, they are careful now not to leave bins of melons out at night, after being a bit too trusting in early years.

Start the U-pick season slowly - When the strawberries start ripening, opening day is quiet. Debbie will put a few buckets out for the regular customers who know to check the fields in mid-April. The next week, Robert will post a message to the members on his Google group, sending them all an email notice that the berries are ripe. (He recommends the Google group rather than a regular email blast which tends to go to spam folders.) In another week or so, when production peaks, they will put up 3 big signs along County Road 99 and start staffing the farm stand. (Editor: Twitter & Facebook could help.)



More U-pick tips from Robert Ramming:

- Be sure to get good insurance. Pacific Star Gardens has a farm insurance policy from Allied Insurance (now part of Nationwide) that covers their visitor activities. It can be expensive, so price the produce accordingly.
- Tell the customers to let the kids eat what they want, and don't worry about it. This keeps the excitement up, keeps kids interested and parents picking longer.
- Gallon plastic berry buckets are available from Berry Plastics in Ohio. They last about a year before cracking, but get lots of use. No weighing is needed. No scales need to be certified.
- Think about a marketing plan for the berries that ripen midweek, while most U-pick demand is on the weekends.
- Don't even think about using ladders for U-pick fruit. Everything must be picked with feet on the ground.
- It doesn't take much acreage. Most visitors now are picking smaller quantities for fun, pies and eating, rather than larger quantities for processing. Short berry rows work fine.
- Plant so something's always ready to pick, but not everything ready at once. You don't need the earliest varieties.
- U-pick is a great way to promote other activities, CSA memberships and events. Build relationship with visitors. (Editors note: Collect email addresses, fans & followers!)

For more information: [Robert or Debbie Ramming](#), 530.666.7308

Online field trip and tour booking

Customer-pleasing, time-saving program



Darren Schmall realized a few years ago that booking a field trip to his Madera County educational [Pizza Farm](#) at Cobb Ranch could take 6 or 7 phone calls, adding up to a lot of staff time and frustrations for teachers trying to arrange the trip. He searched for booking software that would do what he needed, but could not find any that worked for farm field trips.

Schmall built a program for his own website that gives a teacher the opportunity to see the entire tour schedule and to book online at her

convenience. As soon as she submits her request, she gets a confirmation email, Schmall's office gets an email and the calendar site is updated to reserve the number of spaces she requests, thus avoiding overbooking.

The program also includes a reporting function, allowing easy creation of printouts for daily or weekly staff scheduling, and an invoice creation function so an automatically calculated invoice is ready for the teacher when she arrives.

After two or three years of working out the bugs, Schmall has made his [online booking program](#) available to other agritourism operators. It is currently being used by more than 20 operators of different sizes for booking field trips, tours, campfire circle rentals, wine tasting tours, and other activities. It can be linked to a credit card payment system if the operator has an account with a payment service.

In other news, the Cobb Ranch has lost its lease, and Schmall will be moving the Pizza Farm, the corn maze, and the rest of the operation to a new location after this season. For more info, contact [Darren Schmall](#), 559.363.5433

Putting on a feast in the walnut orchard

Solano Land Trust raises funds to save agland



Have you ever considered inviting a couple of hundred people out to your orchard to eat a gourmet four course meal prepared by an executive chef using local food?

Greg Peterson of Solano Land Trust organized the first annual [Farm Fresh Feast](#) this May 8th in the walnut orchard at [Dixon Ridge Farms](#), near Winters. His goal was to raise \$10,000 to support the land trust's agricultural easement purchases which preserve agricultural land in the county. Guests paid \$95 for the elegant outdoor candlelight dinner, a tour of the walnut operation including the new solar and walnut shell power generation, a live blues band, carriage rides and educational talks by local agriculture experts.

Peterson shared a little about the work involved in putting the feast together. He has been planning the event for about six months, and says that is not long enough. Here are some of his suggestions:

- Form a nice big healthy committee. He has a committee of seven people, with a dozen more making phone calls.
- Give planning plenty of time, more than six months.
- Get the main things out of the way first. The main things are food, entertainment, host farm or other location, and sponsors. For this dinner, all of the food was donated by local producers.
- Arrange for lots of volunteers for the day of the event. This dinner involved 25 to 30 volunteers.

Mariposa County agritourism zoning changes

Low-impact activities to be allowed by right in phase one

Mariposa County Planning Director Kris Schenk and staff consultant Karen Robb have been working for more than a year with the



[Mariposa Agriculture Tourism Advisory Committee](#) to negotiate a level of agritourism activity on land zoned "agriculture exclusive" (AE) that meets the approval of agritourism operators, the Farm Bureau, the Cattlemen's Association, and other concerned citizens.

On April 23rd, the planning commission recommended to the county Board of Supervisors that the carefully worded amendments to the county code be adopted with a few minor changes. The next step is a public hearing before the Board of Supervisors in June, with the new regulations going into effect perhaps by July or August, 2010. The Sierra Sun Times wrote a detailed [article](#) about the recent hearing.

The proposed amendments allow for moderately low numbers of visitors and events to be permitted "by right" on farms and ranches if applicable building, health, parking, access and related standards are met. Newly defined permitted uses include roadside stands, tasting rooms, u-pick operations, agricultural home-stays, "glamping" operations (catered camping, using semi-permanent cabin tents), collaborative Agri-Nature tourism events and other activities involving specifically detailed, limited numbers of people and event days.

Larger and more frequent activities would be allowed after the operator receives a new-to-Mariposa County Administrative Use Permit, which the staff estimates would take about 6 to 8 weeks to obtain. 4-H and FFA projects are exempt from these permit requirements. Even larger or more frequent activities would be considered by the planning commission for Conditional Use Permits.

Planner Schenk hopes that everyone involved in the process will be satisfied with the allowances described in the new codes. He believes that "This might be a good model for rural counties similar to ours where there is strong interest in protecting agricultural production." For phase two, the advisory committee will consider appropriate agritourism activity levels for other agricultural zoning categories. For more information, [Karen Robb](#), 209.966.5151

For more information about regulating agritourism and examples of county planning and regulation of agritourism, see [our website](#).

Passion for the land

Personal stories from the Sierra Valley

"Farmers are the minority now, so we have to educate." explains Sierra Valley rancher Dave Goss, one of the participants in the [Passion for the Land](#) Project.

Goss and eleven of his neighbors have just finished making their families' stories of hard work and environmental stewardship available on video. The aim is to help Californians understand how

ranchers take care of cattle, the water and the land, teach local youth about ranching, and struggle to make a living in this Northern California mountain valley.



Ranchers and Cooperative Extension agents partnered with media artists and university scholars to produce and present these stories, in a hands-on effort organized by the [Art of Regional Change](#). The media pieces will be used in outreach efforts designed to help policy makers get a ground-level perspective on resource stewardship and to inform regulatory processes that impact working landscapes. For more information about the process, contact Plumas/Sierra Counties UC Cooperative Extension Livestock & Natural Resource Advisor [Holly George](#), (530) 283-6262

Thanks for reading and doing what you do. Please forward this newsletter to anyone who might find it useful (Click on "forward email" below).

Sincerely,

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