

Pick your Own (PYO): What you need to know to get 5* rated...



Much like Black Friday and Cyber Monday there are many trends which cross the Atlantic and become engrained in the British calendar. Halloween being one, which has now eclipsed Valentine's Day to become the third-biggest event after Christmas and Easter, and with it comes the 'Pumpkin Patch' trend which is starting to make waves. But what do Growers' who run PYO farms need to know? In our series of industry insights, we provide some background to the market, as well as some top tips on ensuring that your customer experience hits that important 5-star customer rating.

What's driving consumer demand?

Whilst traditional Pick your Own farms during the summer months have been around much longer, the 'Pumpkin Patch' experience is a relatively new trend in the UK. The PYO boom began in the 70's with families looking for ways to spend time together, Pick Your Own became a way to spend a day out, picking and eating fresh fruit and vegetables. The popularity of Pick Your Own continued in to the 80's until the rise of supermarkets changed the way we shopped for fresh fruit and veg.

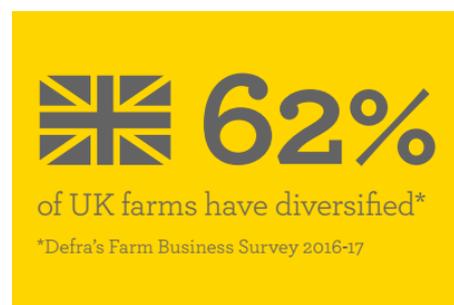
But as consumers become more aware of the sustainability issues and environmental impact of their shopping choices, there is a growing consumer demand for supply chain transparency, reducing food miles and fresh, local food. You can't get much fresher than picking your own fresh fruit and vegetables directly from the farm itself!



The rise of social media sharing platforms such as Instagram also have a part to play, giving further wind to these trends. Many of us want to keep up to date with the latest experiences, and don't like to miss out. With many celebrities and social media influences setting the standard, their avid followers now aspire to replicate their experiences and photo's, which led to an influx of baby pumpkin patch photo's over the Halloween period ([See here](#))!

More than ever, many of us are looking for new experiences, figures show that we are continuing to spend less money on buying things, and more on doing things – and telling the world about it online afterwards, of course. The “experiential hospitality’ market is growing, and research has shown that customers are willing to pay more when they feel they have been part of an experience and had ‘more than just a meal’. Operators have upped their experiential hospitality game in recent years as a result of a growing recognition that it is important to design an experience strategically. New and exciting ways of eating out are arising - think dining while hanging from a crane! We also want to experience and understand how the food and drink we consume is made, with activities such as wine tours, brewery tours, and food production tours increasing in popularity. And of course, we also like to share our experiences through posts and images with families and friends, as the mantra now goes... ***‘Pics or it didn't happen’***.

What's driving the business need?



Boosting income is the obvious reason – but for many farms it also provides opportunities for partners and children to develop a business themselves. This is particularly valuable for farms which can't support several children but have resources suitable for repurposing. According to Defra, 62% of UK farms have diversified, of which 63% see their diversification to be either 'vital' or 'significant' to the financial viability of the farm.

With direct farm subsidy payments set to fall after 2021, farmers are looking at ways to boost their incomes and make their farms sustainable. In the NFU Mutual Diversification Report, Jim McLaren, NFU Mutual Board Director says:

“Resilience and adaptability have always been a part of farming, with many agricultural businesses embracing other sectors



as part of their operation. Long before renewables as we know them today, farmers were producing fuel in the form of oats for horses. One of the major challenges for farmers is to find ways to generate extra income streams to keep farms sustainable and pass them on in a better and stronger condition. In more recent times of adversity, such as the Foot and Mouth outbreak of 2001, diversification helped many farms to recover from the devastating impact of the outbreak.”

The vast majority of diversified farmers' ventures have been positive for the farm and are returning profits. Of those planning to diversify for the first time, 66% plan to do so in the next three years, with the vast majority considering holiday accommodation, followed by renewables.¹

46% of non-diversified farms have not diversified because they believe farming provides the best potential for their holdings.

Other reasons include lack of access to finance, age, lack of interest from family, and poor broadband.

19% of non-diversified farms will definitely or probably diversify in the future.

Top choices for farmers now planning to diversify are:

- **27%** caravan/camping site
- **20%** other holiday accommodation
- **20%** renewable energy

80% of farmers expect their planned diversification scheme will create one or two permanent jobs.

Source: NFU Mutual Diversification Report. For more information about diversification visit: nfumutual.co.uk/farming/farming-diversification

Of those who have already diversified, 20% say do research, planning and preparation well. **So, for those of you considering, or in the process of setting up a PYO venture, we are pleased to share with you the first in a series of factsheets to get you up and running!**



Managing a Pick Your Own Enterprise

A pick your own (PYO) business can be an excellent way of enhancing the profitability of your holdings. By attracting customers onto your site you will be able to sell to them directly, maximizing the profitability of your fresh produce.

Typically, PYO has been focused on fruit, particularly soft fruit, but there has been rising customer demand for pumpkins around Halloween. For diverse holdings other PYO crops can be grown but are likely to be a minor attraction (e.g. sweetcorn, broad beans) or require a specialist approach to growing and marketing (e.g. Christmas trees). While this factsheet focuses on soft fruit and pumpkin PYO enterprises many of the themes discussed here will be relevant to any PYO business.

You can offer recreational experiences in the outdoors, give your customers an experience of horticulture and farming and a cost-efficient family day out. You may also be marketing produce at prices greater than supermarket prices (especially for pumpkins) so you need to see yourself as an experience not just a product – you are competing with the likes of Alton Towers rather than the supermarkets! Given below are a few key areas that you should think about when planning your PYO enterprise but remember to always think of how your customers will experience their visit to your PYO enterprise.

Planning a PYO Business

A PYO business will require you to manage two very different sides of the business – in addition to growing a crop you must also manage an entertainment attraction. Customers will be visiting your site as an outing, looking for enjoyment for themselves and their family and this gives you an opportunity to exploit your unique selling points. PYO enterprises can aim to develop in two different ways: smaller scale PYO businesses focused on grower and selling fresh produce require less investment and less space and may be ideal for new enterprises. Alternatively, larger scale “attraction” theme enterprises aim to offer more to their customers and will need slightly more investment in the long run.

Growing Focused

A more streamlined enterprise with paired down facilities, where the produce is the key focus. The business will be set up to promote a steady flow-through of customers and you are more likely to charge for entry to discourage

	timewasters and ensure good profitability. You may have a farm shop to sell excess fruit and local non-perishable produce and a picnic area outside of the PYO beds, and minimum facilities of toilets, cold drinks and ice cream.
Attraction Focused	You will aim to keep customers on site for as long as possible, and so you will need to provide plenty of facilities for added-value such as a tea room, farm shop, playground or a maize maze. You may be less likely to charge an entrance fee, but your income can be guaranteed from a range of other activities on site. Pumpkin PYO enterprises are more likely to be successful in these settings.

Managing the Customer Experience

Managing the experience will ensure that customers enjoy their visits and are more likely to return, as well as generating a positive social media buzz. Online marketing can be a good way to manage expectations before customers visit your site, so good details on your website with clear information on how you are running the PYO experience will improve customers' visits.

Be open and clear about pricing and costs to avoid disagreement at the point of sale (POS). It may also be helpful to have representative examples of produce showing different price brackets such as pre-priced pumpkins in a display or sample displays/photos of likely prices/weights of fruit to make sure customers come to the till expecting what to pay.

Many customers may be looking for photo opportunities – especially if they have children – so have some suitable backdrops available: displays of large stacks of pumpkins or vintage farm machinery (made safe and secure!) are likely to be popular. If you can have your farm logo somewhere in the background (e.g. banners) this can also offer some free advertising if your customers are uploading their shots to social media.

Pick Your Location

Choosing the right site for the PYO produce can be essential. The distance between the POS and customer facilities (car park, toilets etc.) should be as short as possible to speed the flow of customers through the site. If you have a long walk between the PYO site and the POS there is also greater risk for fruit to be eaten before it can be weighed and paid for! If you have many PYO beds and wish to open different sections at different times signs should be clear to steer customers in the right direction, and you may wish to consider movable barriers to guide

customers on a suitable path to the PYO beds. If you grow a range of crops you may wish to consider planting the highest value produce near to your shop/carpark to get the high returns.

Facilities Planning

Part of being an attraction destination is offering suitable facilities to maximize accessibility and accommodation to your customers. If you are considering investment, making sure you have adequate car parking and toilet facilities (including baby changing facilities) may be one option.

If you are running several businesses on site (such as a farm shop alongside the PYO) you might want to think about separating the activities: having a dedicated POS for the PYO fruit means customers can be streamlined when leaving the site without having to clog up a farm shop that is not set up to deal with a large number of customers at any one time.

Just as important as facilities are staff. A café can be a particularly good investment, particularly if you are targeting the “attraction” style PYO – this will be particularly popular with families with young children and may offer income when the weather would discourage normal PYO customers.

Making Pick Your Own Profitable

There are a variety of ways to make a PYO enterprise profitable, but it would be best to fit with your customer base. For summer fruit, an initial decision can be whether to charge or not. A flat fee per head can ensure a minimum income and may be suitable for larger family groups that are unlikely to buy large quantities of fruit. This may be a little unpalatable with your customers, but you could make the entrance fee redeemable against picked fruit purchased at the end of the visit.

If you have a range of soft fruit available think about having a range of collection punnets available in sizes matching likely pickings. You can offer hard plastic buckets branded with your farm name for a small price with a discount for reuse to encourage return visits. For pumpkin you can grade fruit on the basis on diameter (e.g. dropping through a series of grading holes) but this may not be suitable for tall cultivars.



Opportunities for Added Value

Even if you are not running a farm shop, there is still potential to offer additional products to improve sales. Jam making kits and recipe cards may be attractive to soft fruit customers and can help sell larger quantities if you are facing a glut of fruit after a spell of good weather. Other ingredients like meringues may also be attractive to customers.

For pumpkins low cost Halloween-themed items (e.g. spooky chocolates) and pumpkin carving kits can be attractive at the POS, although be careful not to dilute your unique selling point of field-fresh pumpkins.

Offering other activities may also be a way for generating additional income and enhance the customer experience. In the summer activities like bouncy castles could be provided if you have space, but these could be subcontracted out to a third party to avoid additional costs if these are to be provided only during peak periods like school holidays. For “attraction” style enterprises play areas with climbing walls, swings etc. can be particularly attractive to families.

Space could be offered for pumpkin carving on site for a small fee, supervised by staff in costume – picnic benches could be moved into empty polytunnels to make use of space that would otherwise be unused at this time of year.

A calendar of events can also increase footfall – summer BBQs, Halloween “Spooktaculars” or family days – featuring additional activities like face painting, exotic animals or child-friendly activities. Workshops for schools, local clubs (e.g. scouts) or on hobby topics (gardening, beekeeping) can also be a way of engaging with a range of customer types and age groups. To make maximum benefit for events you’ll need to have a fanfare of publicity to make your customers aware that something special is planned.

What have we learnt?

- If you are considering, or in the process of setting up a PYO attraction, make sure you do your research and listen to advice. And if you already have a PYO attraction, keep learning and keep improving your offer.
- Make social media a priority in your planning...How can you utilise social media to promote your attraction and offer? How can you encourage your customers to post to social media? How will your attraction be branded to ensure maximise exposure?

- Keep the customer experience at the forefront of your mind. Think about the journey you want to take your customer on, what you want them to do, and what do you want them to purchase? Make use of signage, pathways and displays to guide the customer flow.
- Think about the added extra's...what else can you offer? Perhaps a café with local food and drink available? Is it additional purchases such as jam making kits? Take time to think about what your customers might want and make it easy for them to buy.

We hope that you found this fact sheet helpful, if so keep an eye out for our next editions:

- Making online marketing & social media work for your PYO
- Top tips for maintaining your PYO attraction

Tyfu Cymru recently announced the launch of three new networks (Pumpkin, Soft Fruit and Top Fruit) to support Welsh commercial growers by providing study tours, workshops, expert advice, training and networking opportunities. If you are interested in joining these networks, please contact tyfucymru@lantra.co.uk or call 01982 552646