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Alternative Farm Enterprises – Agritourism Success Stories

Family Fun and Education, Pick-Your-Own, and Community-Supported Agriculture

Interview with Kate Zurschmeide, Great Country Farms,
18780 Foggy Bottom Road, Bluemont, Virginia 20135,
540-554-2073, farmer@greatcountryfarms.com,
www.greatcountryfarms.com

What is the history of your farm and farming experience?

Mark, my husband, grew up on a farm in Loudoun County, Virginia. His parents owned and leased land for the pick-your-own and fresh pumpkin market and a pick-your-own strawberry enterprise for over 25 years. They also marketed their products at their own farm market in nearby Leesburg. They were the largest pumpkin producer in the state in the 1980's. I did not get involved in agriculture until 1987 when I married Mark. He was farming by leasing land and growing pumpkins and strawberries in the mid-1980's. Then, we purchased our current farm of 187 acres, of which 50 acres is wooded, 100 acres are planted into vegetables, berries, vine and tree crops. The remainder is farmyard, ponds, agritourism fun areas, parking, and areas to keep the petting farm animals.

Describe the alternative enterprises in which you are presently engaged?

We currently operate a pick-your-own strawberry, blueberry, raspberry, black raspberry, pumpkins, flowers, herbs and vegetable garden enterprises. We are not a certified organic farm, even though most of our produce and berries are grown without the use of pesticides or herbicides. We also have an on farm market retail store. Our orchard crops

are just starting to produce and include apricot, peach, plum, cherry and apple trees.

We operate a 200-member Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) where the produce is delivered for 22 weeks up to 60 miles away. Additionally, CSA members may come and pick a pre-determined amount of the “pick-your-own” crops each week as part of their membership fee. Agritourism is also a major enterprise on our farm during the whole season but becomes most popular in the fall. We focus on education and fun for the family and school children. Some activities are: 60 foot in-hill-tunnel slide, tunnels, mazes, fishing pond, petting farm (pigs, chickens, ducks, goats, rabbits, llamas, a donkey, cows, sheep, and turkeys), pig races, pony rides, three picnic areas for birthdays, business picnics and family reunions, education stations for dairy and chickens, hayrides, and a composting educational area.

We also turn our “vegetable bedding plant starter” greenhouse into a workshop for school groups in spring and summer, as part of our education program is to teach young children, kindergarten to fourth grade, about how their food is produced. This is also done through the “Farm Animal Barnyard,” “ABC Garden,” “Goat Tree House” and the “Kid Corral” play area.

In 2001, we added a 22,000 square foot greenhouse to grow bedding plants and hanging baskets for the contract wholesale market.

What made you decide to go into the present alternative enterprises? Goal? Vision?

Mark always knew he wanted to farm. Our goal and vision was to have a self-sustaining farm that would support our family. For about 4 years, Mark farmed and worked a full time job as a financial planner and accountant. Pumpkins and strawberries were the main crops until Great Country Farms was purchased. We found that we were always too busy to enjoy life when working two jobs. In 1993, Mark started farming full time when we purchased our farm. I continued to work for Verizon. I would leave for the office on Monday and not return until Friday as my work resulted in long days and frequent travel. We both knew there was “no office politics” on the farm!! It was time for a change.

How did you make the transition?

We knew that leasing of land did not have a future. Loudoun County was developing into a Washington, D.C. suburb so land prices were raising. We found this farm in the western part of the county that had been on the market for several years. We went to the owners, the Mormon Church, with a 45-member CSA agreement and earnest money. They agreed to finance the remainder. So, we became owners in late 1993, and began our CSA in 1994. We also knew from the beginning that agritourism would be one of the enterprises because of the success relatives were having in Indiana. We started our agritourism enterprise with local day care schools in 1994 until we developed the farm, play and learning activities. It was a learning curve for us too.

The farm has several old buildings and several natural springs. These barns and buildings really give the look and feel of a farm that “Grandpa” had. Our major natural spring provides an adequate water supply that keeps a 2-acre pond filled to a depth of 10 feet. This is our irrigation water source for the garden to insure produce for

our CSA members, and water for our animals. We also stock the pond and use it as part of our agritourism enterprise.

A chronological listing of our activities will show how we managed our growth at Great Country Farms.

1992—started PYO pumpkins on leased land

1993—purchased the farm and PYO pumpkins

1994—operated a 45 member CSA, pick-your-own strawberries and pumpkins and started our agritourism and agrieducation enterprise

1995—expanded CSA to 900 members (A big mistake for us).

1996—reduced CSA to 100 members and grew the school tour business.

1997—started to regrow the CSA by adding 25 shares/year, started the Fall Harvest Festival, planted first apple orchards, built chicken coop, pig house, added a dual purpose shed that is used for equipment storage in the off season and a birthday party area otherwise, trained goats to walk up the 10-inch wide board ladder and develop fun activities for the education and agritourism enterprise.

1998—started to build our own house on the farm.

1999—added first greenhouse for CSA and group tours, and expanded the educational programs to the summer and Kate joined the farm full time.

2000—Added maze, pig races and tunnels to play area, built a “Little Farmer Barnyard” (allows the smaller children to play without getting bowled over by the big kids), built a dual purpose machine shed that stores equipment in the off season and is a third picnic area, otherwise, dug another pond by “springs” for tree crop irrigation, and added Haunted Hayride (abandoned it after the first year to re-design.)

2001—Added large slide, and educational signage, built the pig racing barn and the goat tree house, and Fall Festival barn, which serves as retail farm market, CSA processing shed and large party barn, and completed planting of orchards and vineyards.

2002—Added wholesale greenhouse business, and enhanced 200-member CSA delivery by using a delivery company.

What is your business planning and decision making process?

Mark, being a financial planner/accountant, developed a business plan for the farm. We determined the enterprise sizes that were needed to make it a profitable venture. We also develop a business and marketing plan for every enterprise that we have added to the farm. If it does not show a profit, we don't do it. However, this does not keep us from testing new ideas and keep us from being creative. We just don't invest a lot of money until we have tested it.

We also made some very substantial family financial decisions that allowed us to make this move. We traded a larger home and two cars for a happier and more healthier life. I continued to work at Verizon until 1999, when our third child, Jake, was born. Now, I am a full time working partner in the business rather than just on weekends.

What went wrong? and Why? How did you correct it?

The first year of the CSA was so successful that Mark's father and brothers decided to join us. We increased our 45 member CSA up to 900 members in 1995. This explosive growth caused several problems. We found ourselves being a delivery company rather than a farm with some drivers leaving at 6:00 a.m. and not returning till 12:00 midnight, while other drivers would return with a truckload of produce because they did not want to make the deliveries. We had delivery trucks on the road four days a week. Trucks would break down and the long hours were disheartening. It just got out of control! So, in the third year, 1996, we reduced to 100 CSA members and have had controlled growth. We now have 200 members. We are trying a new venture with delivery. One CSA member owns a delivery company and they are going to take one route on a trial bases. We are very cautious as Mark, a relative, or an

experienced employee, made all of the deliveries since 1996.

What went right? Why? How are you building on this success?

Our agrieducation program is focused on young school children. We found the local teachers and schools to be very receptive. Today, we make mailings to teachers by class—from Day Care to the fourth grade. Each education program is developed and presented for that age group. We try new ideas and ways of teaching the children in the outdoor classroom at Great Country Farms. We listen to what the teachers and children want to learn about or type of fun they want when they come to the farm. We are now researching and determining if the farm visit and education program would work for intermediate schools. Teachers and students are traveling over 60 miles to come to our farm.

How do you price your products?

We receive some information from the Virginia Department of Agriculture on the pricing of pick-your-own. We look very close at the competition around us and try to remain competitive. The CSA "share" price is \$645 for a 4-5 member family and \$495 for a one-half share which is developed based upon the costs from the bottom up, including delivery.

Our agritourism and agrieducation prices change by season. School children are charged \$4.00 in the spring and receive a "planting kit" and U-pick item and \$4.50 in the fall and receive a pumpkin, apple cider and an apple" in the fall. The hayride, feed for the petting farm animals are included in the spring and fall. Other visitors are charged a \$2.50 fee or \$10.00 per car between May 1 and September 15, and for the Fall Festival \$5.00 per person, or \$20.00 per car on weekends from September 15 to October 31. Pony rides are \$2.00, and non-group visitors purchase the feed fed to the animals.

How do you acquire your information?

CSA surveys are our biggest source of information. We listen very carefully to what our customers are saying they like or dislike. We attended a seminar on CSA sponsored by the Loudoun County Economic Development Council and grew our CSA business from there. We do an extensive amount of reading about our products and businesses.

How do you market or promote your enterprises?

We have brochures describing our business. We send mailers to the schools for spring and fall visits. I have a weekly CSA newsletter that describes what is happening on the farm and what crops are available that week. It also contains recipes on how to use the produce they receive that week. I place an ad in the local "Convention, Visitor's Bureau" publication for the county, plus ads in the local and Washington Post newspapers during the Fall Harvest days of September and October.

How do you handle your liability concern?

North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association provided our coverage until this year when they reduced their coverage. We are looking for companies that provide higher umbrella policies. We have so many activities for children that adequate coverage is a must.

What would be the most important advice you would give other farmers considering an alternative enterprise?

- Do extensive research on marketing. You are an entrepreneur and must understand your market if you are to be successful.
- Listen very carefully to your customer as they can see things you don't about your business.
- Don't be afraid to try new ideas or new ways of doing something. Test it and see if it works for you and your customers.
- Customers are special and require special treatment. They can make or break you. They

are the best advertisement you can buy. Invest time in them and grow them.

- Use signage to lead people around your farm as they have no clue about what is right or wrong on the farm. They need information on what to pick or not to pick, where to step, how to pick crops, and what not to touch or climb.

What would you have done differently?

We would have controlled our growth at the beginning. It really hurt us financially and emotionally. We still talk about it at least once a week. Our best advice is to start small and grow as you learn. I would also have researched the pricing of products better in all areas of our business. An entrepreneur must have price knowledge; alternative marketing plans, and understands the competition and the customer. We jumped in and planted 400 fruit trees and lost almost all of them to the deer in one season. We dug up the few that did make it and planted them in our "Memorial Apple Orchard" near one of our party venues. We are now replanting and using a number of deer controls including electric fence and dogs.

Where do you plan to go from here?

Our next step is to expand the school program to include children who are in middle school. We need to determine their needs and develop a program to meet it. As our new fruit trees and berry bushes begin to mature, we are going to start a bakery and make fruit pies and other baked goods.

What do you like and dislike the most?

We like making our own decisions and setting our own directions. It doesn't feel like work. We are really enjoying our lifestyle. We feel like we are participating in the world as we grow food and fun and share it with our customers. We love training our animals to do tricks for the children. Our customers have become an extended family. It was unbelievable the amount of assistance we received when our fourth child, Carly, was born in July 2001. They brought us meals and many even brought baby gifts. I receive a special joy from

people relating to the farm, open space, and sharing our hopes and dreams. They are so supportive. The dislike! “The work is never done.” There is always something to repair or build on this farm.

Would you start this alternative enterprise business today after learning what is involved?

We would definitely do it again!! We do not feel like operating this farm for growing food and fun is work. It is fun!

What groups/organizations/activities have you joined or become involved in because of alternative enterprises?

We belong to the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association, Loudoun County Convention and Visitors Association, of which Kate is now a board member, and Loudoun Valley Homegrown Farmers Marketing Association.

What do your customers like the most about your product(s) or enterprise(s)?

Visitors and customers enjoy the “real working farm” and the open space. Our customers also feel a sense of ownership that is shown by their support. They are as excited about our growth and value as we are. They feel like they are part of the farm. Two freezes of 2001 hit our strawberry production and we could not provide the quantity of strawberries that we had in the past. The

members accepted this once they found out they received all of our strawberries. They would not accept any rebate. The CSA customers now understand how they are sharing our risk. If we have a crop failure, they would not receive the produce or berries. This builds the feeling of ownership and support. We also write into our CSA agreement that we do not deliver the fourth week of July, as this is family vacation time. We have never had one unsatisfactory word about this policy. We receive only wishes to have a great vacation!

We believe our CSA customer relationship is very strong. We work on building and keeping this relationship. We measure this success by the fact that 75 percent of our members return every year and by the beginning of the season we have about 50 people on a waiting list. This makes it very easy to build to capacity the following year. Also, we do not advertise our CSA. It has grown by word of mouth.

Would it be ok for people to contact you?

Yes

Do you want additional information?

For more success stories and other information, see:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/RESS/altenterprise>.

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