

Adding or adapting building space or land for dedicated Agritourism: Value-Added Spaces

By Jon and Erin Turner, Turner Farms in Missoula

If you are looking to add agritourism to your existing operation, begin by looking at your existing physical resources, eg. old barns, homesteads, under-utilized buildings, and land. These potential spaces could open up into a vast array of agritourism opportunities for your farm. Examples of these opportunities are: 1) converting a barn, garage or machine shed into a wedding venue, rental space for public gatherings, retreat space, and/or educational training space 2) Renovating a homestead or older farmhouse into a VRBO or Air BnB (vacation rentals) 3) Converting or building a farm stand/store to sell your raw and/or value-added farm or ranch products.

Agritourism Assets

As you begin exploring all your options within the Agritourism industry, it's important to assess your existing assets rather than starting from scratch. Under utilized assets are diamonds in the rough and could potentially offer you a financial return you weren't previously capturing. Having the public come to your farm or ranch offers them an opportunity to learn more about your operation, creates transparency for the consumer and builds familiarity and customer loyalty.



This Agritourism option offers the farmer or rancher the chance to expand into the customer service world. Since many family farms are looking to bring the next generation of their family back to the farm/ranch, this could be an opportunity to manage a new profit center for the family operation. For the last number of years, especially post-pandemic, the general public has been sincerely interested in the day to day activities of farm and ranch life and they are willing to monetize that experience. People are looking to experience simplicity and wholesomeness. They also value local farms and ranches and the products these operations offer for purchase. If you are willing to share your operation and allow the public to see what farming and ranching is about, then this is the perfect time to capture this Agritourism opportunity.



- What value-added space do you have available on your farm/ranch to add an agritourism opportunity?
- How to establish an agritourism business through an added space (barn, farm stand, U-Pick Patch, etc) and what steps you need to take to implement this operation.
- This guide will help you determine if a value-added space dedicated for agritourism is in your wheelhouse.

Value-Added Spaces: What to know

If you are a current or future Agritourism professional you will want to know more about pursuing the addition or adaptation of building space dedicated for Agritourism. The most important things to know about this topic are the following:

- **Know your customer base:** Who are you trying to sell this experience to? This will help you tailor your spaces and products to the expectations for those customers. When consumers' expectations are met or exceeded, then revenue naturally follows and is repeated.
- **Public-friendly spaces:** The general public expects easy access, clearly marked parking, cleanliness, access to restrooms/porta potty, friendly staff, well-cared for animals, accessibility to livestock or crops, signage explaining boundaries, prices and operations, child-friendly space,
- **Consistency:** Hours of operation, availability of signature products, social media presence, level of customer service
- **Authenticity:** We aren't here to sell a "Yellowstone" experience; we are real people who farm and ranch and have a passion for what we do. We want to share our lifestyle with others in order for them to understand and appreciate our industry. People can see through a false facade, so if you aren't passionate about agriculture it'll show through and people won't come back.
- **Insurance:** Once you determine what buildings/land you will be inviting the public to access, you will want to contact your insurance agent and begin determining how much liability insurance you will need. The level of insurance will be dependent upon what type of agritourism activity you'll be offering at your location.
- **County Health/Building Department regulations:** Contact your county building department for any building permits. Also, contact your county health department about food regulations for serving and/or selling. Familiarize yourself with the Montana State Local Food Choice Act (use the QR code to the right). This legislation offers a producer some exemptions on food products if they produce the raw ingredients themselves.
- **Point of Sale:** Be prepared with up-to-date equipment to accept credit or debit cards, Venmo and/or PayPal (electronic payment options). Customers like the ease of payment and many of them do not carry cash or checks. When you make it easy to pay, the customer is more apt to spend more.
- **Social Media:** Most consumers interested in agritourism are on social media. Establish a consistent presence on at least one if not more platforms of social media. Draw people in by regular posts with pictures, videos and sales. Make followers feel a part of your operation, this creates a deep loyalty to your business.



Scan the QR code for
the MT State Local
Food Choice Act pdf!



Your next steps:

- 1 Evaluate your desire to invite people onto your property and provide them with an experience of farm/ranch life.**
 - 2 Determine where on your property will this occur. Is there an existing building or land that would provide an agritourism opportunity?**
 - 3 Gather information pertaining to regulations (local and state), building codes, tax info, and other laws.**
 - 4 Gather information from your community about the desire and need for what experience/opportunity you would like to offer. Is it something viable which will be supported by the local community? (Or figure out who your audience/customer base will be).**
 - 5 Figure out the finances needed to establish this agritourism opportunity.**
 - 6 Establish a schedule for the “roll out.” Building, marketing, and implementation.**
 - 7 Begin marketing through social media, establishing a website and other forms of information.**
 - 8 Determine how and who will be staffing your business. Dedicate a family member or plan on hiring an outside person.**
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Things to consider before you jump in:

- ◇ Is your farm/ranch a safe place for the public?
- ◇ Do you have adequate parking near your agritourism space?
- ◇ Are you prepared to deal with the retail public on a regular basis?
- ◇ When using social media, plan on checking it regularly and responding in a timely manner.
- ◇ Begin establishing a customer list for email or text information pertaining to your business.
- ◇ Don't assume your business will be successful immediately. It takes time and effort to earn a reputation and trust from customers. Be patient!
- ◇ What is your exit strategy? Can your building and/or space be used for another purpose if you decide not to pursue the agritourism route?
- ◇ What is your level of success? If you reach that goal, are you willing to grow it more and if so, what would that look like? Where could you grow your business and are you willing to make that step? What's your limit?
- ◇ Go to other farms and ranches and see how and what they are doing. Go to ones in your state and ones out of state to see the contrast in what is being offered.
- ◇ If this is a family business, are ALL members on board? What are their roles and what expectations do you have of each member?
- ◇ Remember, not everyone will love your farm or ranch. Be prepared for criticism. Most people are supportive and great but there are always a few who are critical.
- ◇ Set your boundaries. People will want to see and know more. The public isn't always knowledgeable or understand their limits so set up fences, signs, etc so they know where they can go and where they can't. Set hours of operation and don't be afraid to say no. Burn out is usually caused because we don't set limits for ourselves!
- ◇ Bottom line: the public is simply interested in the daily, mundane chores we don't even think twice about. They don't need flashy things...they want simplicity!
- ◇ Have FUN with this! If it's not fun for you, it won't be fun for your customers!

About the authors:

Jon and Erin Turner along with their 3 young adult sons are the owners and operators of Turner Farms in Missoula, MT. They run a diversified farm and ranch, selling a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, lamb, beef and pork. Their popular farm stand is located on the urban fringe of Missoula where they sell their farm products along with an array of other goods. The farm hosts various pop-up Farm Markets throughout the year with other local vendors.

Turner Farms converted an old farm garage into an event space for the public to rent. The Turners' believe strongly in agricultural education, so they have established Youth Farm Camps during the summer for local youth. They also offer a summer intern program for young teens.

The farm is best known for its annual Pumpkin Festival every October. Turner Farms offers a U-Pick pumpkin patch, live music, food trucks and opens the entire farm to the public during this month of festivities. You can find more about Turner Farms by checking out their website:

www.turnerfarms406.com or find them on Facebook and Instagram @ Turner Farms 406.



More Resources:

- Montana Agritourism Fellows: <https://www.montanaagritourism.com/>
- Turner Farms: www.turnerfarms406.com
- Green Bluff Growers in Spokane: www.greenbluffgrowers.com
- Agritourism Overview from WA State Extension: <https://extension.wsu.edu/regional-small-farms/agriculture/agritourism/>