

Lathcoats Farm

Summary

A commercial fruit farm of 55ha with a large farm shop and pick your own (PYO) scheme. In 2000 the farm embarked on a trial rent-a-tree scheme hiring out apple trees in return for their yield. Scheme organiser Philip Taylor has decided to continue the scheme because, although it did not generate a great deal of direct income, it provided valuable publicity for the farm and the farm shop. However he did not expect the amount of administration involved. He said "taking people's contact details and keeping them informed can be time consuming, especially as they all have very different ideas".

History

Opened in 1970, the farm shop has found it increasingly difficult to compete with supermarkets selling foreign apples, and so local direct marketing has become all the more important. Lathcoats borrowed the idea of renting out apple trees from a vineyard that rented out vines and produced wine for its customers. It was thought that such a scheme would increase the profile of the farm shop, and the idea was successfully launched in the 2000 season.

Organisation

The rent-a-tree scheme is based on an informal and flexible arrangement between farm and customers. There are no plans to change this informal structure. In return for a small fee (trees are priced according to their anticipated yield) the customers receive details of the location and variety of the tree. Each customer is guaranteed a certain yield of apples that offers good value compared with supermarket prices. There is no risk because if the rented tree fails, the quota is made up from another tree. Most of the customers lived within 15 miles, although a few came from as far as 35 miles away. Generally customers were young families with children or elderly couples who enjoyed reminiscing about how things used to be.

The farm has not had to advertise the scheme widely as it has grown through word of mouth. The farm shop sells certificates as gifts.

Finance

Each of the subscribers (47 in the first year, 79 at present) pay a set fee for the season's fruit from their tree. Although the rent-a-tree scheme only raises a tiny fraction of the farm's direct income, it is difficult to put a value on the shop and PYO sales generated through the rent-a-tree publicity. The farm does not anticipate having to restrict numbers as the scheme forms only a small part of the overall business and there are plenty more trees available.

Philip Taylor feels that they currently undercharge for the trees in the scheme, especially considering the amount of administration involved and because the experience of renting a tree provides more than just a crop. These other benefits are difficult to quantify, however, and the farm is reluctant to increase prices.

Stephen said "Some customers were so embarrassed at how much they got from their trees that they sent a cash donation to a charity in Lathcoats' name".

Activities

The scheme provided a great deal of publicity, largely through local newspapers and radio. Customers were encouraged to visit the farm and their trees throughout the year. The majority only came on harvest day, but those who watched their fruit develop tended to be more tolerant of imperfections. Lathcoats' Stephen Taylor compared the farm customers, saying: "the PYO scheme customers will reject fruit throwing what they don't want onto the ground, with the rent-a-tree scheme they take it all home as they feel it is theirs". Lathcoats hosts a mini farmers' market to celebrate Apple Day (a national event organised by the charity Common Ground), with stalls, rare breeds from neighbouring farms and games. The centre of attention however is the tasting of 30 varieties of apple. In 2002 the market attracted around 3000 people.

The greatest limitation for the farm's activities is the lack of car parking space.

Future plans

Although the agreement between farm and tree-renter is currently very informal, with just a promise of minimum yield, Philip Taylor acknowledges that it might be helpful to clarify exactly what each party is responsible for, citing an experience when some Bramleys were returned because they had a storage disorder that resulted in them developing harmless but disfiguring brown spotting in their flesh.

Contact Details

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