



Brown's Grove offers farm tours, u-pick, a museum, mail-order citrus and a store where visitors can purchase fresh citrus and juice, honey from a local beekeeper and more.

Diversifying income on citrus farms

By Sarah Bostick

Citrus growers are finding the need to diversify their marketing channels to stay competitive. Consumers are increasingly interested in learning about where their food comes from. It can be good business to diversify into markets designed to capture the attention of these consumers.

CONNECTING WITH CONSUMERS

Tim and Hiedi Brown are third-generation owners of Brown's Grove in Sarasota County, Florida. The Browns have always embraced the importance of directly connecting with customers. For many years, they have sold their citrus at farmers markets, an off-farm farm stand and through mail-order gift baskets.

In 2019, the Browns decided it was

time for a change. Longtime supporters of agriculture education, the Browns swapped their off-farm farm stand for an on-farm experience for customers. The Browns opened their grove for u-pick, made a one-room citrus museum and built a tour wagon.

From December 2019 to March 2020, the Browns offered tours two days a week. The tour route travels through citrus groves, along a neighbor's cattle pasture and through a county-owned preserve where customers see gopher tortoise holes and wild citrus.

The Browns know that customers are hungry to learn about where their food comes from. Each week, the tour featured a different local producer who spoke on topics ranging from organic vegetable production to cattle ranching.

The Browns hoped that by providing different tour themes, they would

get some repeat customers. And they were right. People who came by themselves one week came back the next weeks with friends and family.

OTHER IDEAS

Farm tours, u-pick and farmers markets aren't for everyone. But those are not the only ways to capitalize on the public's growing interest in connecting to their food. There are two marketing trends that are worth looking into: community supported agriculture (CSA) and food hubs.

The basic idea behind a CSA is that customers pay up front for an entire season's worth of food. In exchange, the farmer provides a weekly share of the harvest. Until recently, CSAs were typically run by vegetable farms. And the biggest complaint from CSA customers: Where's the fruit? To keep

customers happy, many vegetable CSA farms purchase fruit from local orchards to add to weekly shares.

As CSAs popularize, farmers and ranchers are partnering to offer full-diet CSAs which may include locally produced fruit, vegetables, meat, eggs, dairy, grains, honey and oil.

Food hubs are distribution companies that focus on distribution of locally produced food. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, "By offering a combination of aggregation, distribution, and marketing services at an affordable price, food hubs make it possible for many producers to gain entry into new larger-volume markets that boost their income and provide them with opportunities for scaling up production."

Food hubs are a common sight in many parts of the country. Although not yet common in the Southeast, food hubs are opening in the citrus belt. 🍊

Sarah Bostick is a University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences sustainable agriculture Extension agent in Sarasota.

A small citrus museum features antique equipment, some of which dates back to 1915 when Brown's Grove was first planted.



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