

## Features

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### It's a Nice Day for a Farm Wedding

John Kennedy



Finishing up with our third installment of On The Road: The Case for Agritourism, we move to a growing trend in the garden center world.

We've journeyed to Lino Lakes, Minnesota, to enjoy the full farm experience with Doug Joyer. We visited McDonald, Pennsylvania, to enjoy a "Farm to Fork" dinner with Russ and Melanie Bedner. And now we finish up in North Brandford, Connecticut, to discover the growing trend of farm weddings.

*Pictured: This fall wedding shows just how beautiful (and fun) a farm wedding can be. Photos by: Carla Ten Eyck*

Souny and I headed north late last summer to revisit an agritourism Pick-Your-Own client we'd worked with in the spring (strategic planning, on-boarding video shoot and yoursharespace.com Intranet platform). As we relished in the abundant amount of blueberries, raspberries and soon-to-be apples, I asked Aaron Libby if anyone has ever requested to be married at his orchard. He said at least one or two times a week.

Interesting ...

We turned the RV south and headed towards home, driving through Spencer, Massachusetts, to connect with our friends at Bemis Farms Nursery. During our visit, I asked again if anyone ever seeks to be married at the garden center, and Tina and Ed's nephew Carter said, "At least one or two times a week."

In fact, he'd just booked his first farm wedding that very week. (The family farm also does a large agritourism pumpkin event in the fall and is also contemplating a sunflower field as well ... so kudos to youdos!).

So this idea of a farm wedding is not new. In fact, it's gained popularity over the last decade as the Millennial generation emerged from the recession (and basements) at marrying age, realized they didn't want to spend a lot of money on such an event (values have changed) and looked to be more frugal with their funds—a reduced footprint, a unique experience, surrounded by nature's beauty. And money saved to buy a home!

So, if garden centers are being asked once or twice a week to host a wedding, it seems the demand is there. Although the current answer may be "no," your next and future answers might become "maybe" or yes!" A few times a week (again, liberal arts major) is like, 50 to 100 times a year. That's a big "no's to dough" ratio.

Maybe today you can vow to say, “Yes! Yes, we do!”

Maybe, “It’s a nice day for a farm wedding!”

Ryan Van Wilgen of Van Wilgen’s Garden Center in North Brandford, Connecticut, has been following this trend over the years and has finally made the leap into the nuptials business. Ryan and his team produce a “Field Wedding” on the stunning grounds of their fourth-generation family farm.

I caught up with Ryan after a visit shooting their on-boarding video in April and dug a little deeper into their approach and success of this agri-trend.



When asked how his idea for farm weddings began, Ryan replied, “The first wedding at the farm was our own (Ryan and his wife Kate). We knew that there was no place that we could get married that would mean as much as the farm to us. We knew at that time this was such a cool spot that we should consider this is as a business opportunity. Our first wedding was in June of 2019, a friend of the owner to the catering company who was our first preferred vendor took the leap of faith and got married at the farm.”

We went on to discuss how Ryan and his team feel the future of farm weddings look.

“I feel we are just getting started. We built a website, started social pages, talked about the new venue in our e-news and put a link on our website. No bridal shows or outside advertising, and we have had around 12 weddings since starting up. We are going to lean in and start getting this machine rolling by doing outside advertising.”

And, finally, the conversation turned to the garden center industry, the tectonic shifting that’s occurring over the next decade, and how agritourism plays a role in Van Wilgen’s strategic plan.

Ryan answered by quoting a few notes he spoke about during his annual spring kick-off to the wonderful team at Van Wilgen’s (including Will O’Hara, who’s featured in this very magazine this month as a finalist for the Young Retailer Award!).

“Today, we are once again faced with a shifting paradigm; one where consumers are heavily focused on sustainability, buy local and predominantly ‘experiences.’”



Agritourism is the next step for Van Wilgen’s to diversify and remain relevant in order to attract these new customers who are looking to get outside, enjoy their surroundings and have an experience that brings them closer to nature.

Not only are we reacting to shifting consumer demands; we are also reacting to what seems like the new norm—I’ll call it “prolonged unsettled weather patterns.” The last three springs, this one included, have put an enormous strain on our hyper-seasonal business. Seventy percent of revenues occur within a short 10-

week window and this “unsettled” weather has adversely affected our customer count, and in turn, our revenues. Adding a diversified revenue source during our “down months” is proving to be a necessity for our farm business to endure this new “normal.”

The time to add value to your business offering, to meet your new customer base with their set of values, and to expand your revenue-generating months is now.

The future of the garden center is agritourism and the future is now. It's a nice day to ... start again!

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## An Eggcellent Adventure

I wanted to provide another example of agritourism and how easily it can fit into any garden center's strategic plan without too much time or effort.

Back in April, while perusing social media, I stumbled upon a very fun evening event that brought adult folks to the farm ... fun ensued ... and funds were made.

It was the week before Easter and parents had already done the obligatory egg coloring for the kiddos. Some may even have attended an Easter Egg hunt at the local elementary school or community gathering place because, you know, the only humans on the face of the Earth who are allowed to have fun are kids, right?

Wrong!

Everyone deserves to have fun—especially as we come out of the “Great Pause” and put our lives back into gear ... a new-found wanting, dare I say, needing, to actively participate in life, to run towards it and not just stumble through it, has become front and center today.

Jon Meredith, of Sweet Eats Fruit Farm in Georgetown, Texas, did something so incredibly simple and yet so incredibly fun: an adult Easter Egg hunt. As the sun began to set, each party-goer was handed a White Claw adult beverage, gathered, got their faces painted, learned the rules and then were invited to unleash the child within them! (The admission fee was \$35/person).

Armed with flashlights and fancy, along with a “shotgun” start, parents and adults alike raced to the field to gather as many eggs as they could in the one-hour window. And I mean they raced ... like kids headed for the swings during recess!

At the end of the “running of the ’rents,” cash and prizes were announced, everyone rejoiced in the recess they just experienced, and then, after losing themselves in the music, the moment, “ope, snap back to reality,” they headed back to their regularly scheduled programming.

I’m a liberal arts major, so math does not come easily, however, quick “cowboy math” can surmise that this was an extremely profitable endeavor. Two weekends in a row, sold out in advance with 250 folks each evening ... not too shabby!

Congrats, Jon and Team Eats!

There's no reason a garden center couldn't widen their offering to have a similar event at their location. Spring, summer, fall, winter. There are four seasons and many more reasons to have your customer base return to your garden center just one more time.

If you could have 25% of your loyal customers return to your garden center one more time a year, spending the average amount per transaction, the financial outcome would be staggering. Get out a calculator ... and then get

out your magical thinking machine!

Finding joy and fun in something so simple that evokes a time and place in our own lives is what agritourism is all about.

Get outside, enjoy life, play with your kids, experience joy, create memories, unplug and toss out the stress and tension ... even if for just a few short hours. **GP**

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*John Kennedy is the co-founder of Agritourism.Life and a service provider for The Garden Center Group. He and his wife Souny have created a robust platform that promotes, engages and benchmarks farms, garden centers and wineries in North America. Their magazine, digital solutions and search engine are dedicated to celebrate and accelerate the growing momentum and movement of agritourism world-wide. Visit [www.agritourism.life](http://www.agritourism.life) or [www.yoursharespace.com](http://www.yoursharespace.com) for more information and solutions. And make sure to visit their booth at Cultivate in Columbus, Ohio, in July.*