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Spring's the thing for an agritourism fling

LITTLE ROCK – Warmer weather and blooming things offer lots of opportunities for taking part in agritourism in Arkansas. The start of the growing season offers a chance for you to learn more about our state's agricultural resources, and to benefit from them, as well.

One sign that spring has arrived: the blossoming of Arkansas' unique and creative festivals, such as the Hogskin Holiday Festival in Hampton, the Cabot Strawberry Festival, and the Alma Spinach Festival.

Stacey McCullough, an extension community development instructor with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, says "because agriculture is such an important part of the economy and heritage in Arkansas, many of our spring festivals have agricultural themes. These festivals provide opportunities for farmers, producers and others who provide value-added processing to agricultural products to showcase their products. In addition, festivals allow communities to celebrate their local history and heritage."

At many festivals, attendees have a chance to sample and purchase items produced here in Arkansas, and perhaps see different usages for these items. There's often other ways certain products are featured, such as competitions by home bakers and canners.

Agritourism can also add value to spring break for children, a chance to learn about agriculture outside of the classroom.

"Many pick-your-own fruit and berry operations will open in mid to late spring. In addition, farmers markets open for the season in the spring as well," McCullough said. "Other opportunities currently listed on the calendar of events this spring include fruit tours at Suzanne's Fruit Farm in Hampton and the Annual Randolph County Old Fashion Plowing Demonstration." says McCullough.

There are "other agritourism opportunities open year round include agricultural museums, wineries, trail riding, and farms that offer tours on request," she says.

Agritourism operators can list information, including hours of operation and special instructions at www.arkansas.com/agritourism."

Spring's also a great time to buy fresh produce. Prices may or may not rival grocery store prices, but there are still great reasons to purchase from local growers.

“Although local farmers may not be able to produce food as cheaply as that brought in from elsewhere, many consumers like the idea of knowing where their food is coming from, especially in today's world,” says McCullough. “As a result, they're often willing to pay a little more to ensure a high-quality, locally-grown product.”

And by purchasing from local growers, money generated from such sales stays in our state and helps farmers continue to be able to produce and offer great quality produce and meats for the discerning consumer.

So whether it's celebrating the Peach Blossoms in Nashville, celebrating the Chicken and Egg Festival in Prescott, spending a weekend on the farm at the Bar Fifty Ranch near Bismarck, enjoying the Wye Mountain Daffodil Festival or picking berries at Cox Berry Farms, you'll find lots of agritourism opportunities, right here in Arkansas.

If you're interested in finding out more, check out the Arkansas Agritourism Institute's Web site at www.arkagritourism.org, visit www.uaex.edu or contact your county extension agent.

The Cooperative Extension Service is a part of the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

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