



PHOTO BY BRIDGER GORDON

Turning Agritourism Into An Asset

Looking for a little supplemental income?
Opening your ranch gate to share with your urban neighbors may offer opportunity to connect.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Do you marvel at the sunrise on your ranch every morning, or have a scenic pasture setting that causes you to pause each time you take it in? Chances are city folks might be awestruck by that same scenery — and willing to pay a premium price for an authentic ranch experience to boot.

Agritourism can be as simple as that, showing people a slice of your real ranch life. And, it can generate a supplemental to full-time income, depending on what services you offer.

“The sky’s the limit with agritourism,” says Jan Jantzen, who has operated an agritourism entity on his property in the Flint Hills of Kansas for more than a decade. Jantzen is also director of rural tourism development for the Flint Hills RC&D and travels the country teaching an agritourism business course.

Jantzen reports that agritourism can add \$5,000-\$8,000 a year to an operation’s annual income — and it can take off from there. “There are people in agritourism making \$100,000 annually,” he says.

What should you do?

So, if agritourism has piqued your interest, what tourism entity might you offer? And how can you get started? Jantzen offers these guidelines:

1. Inventory your assets. Jantzen encourages looking at all that you have to offer through the eyes of a potential guest: the stars, coyotes howling, the scenic views, the opportunity to experience the cowboy culture.

“People view our rural life as amazing, and we often don’t see that,” says Jantzen.

Case in point: For Jantzen, spring burning of the Flint Hills prairie was an annual, and quite ordinary, ritual each spring to keep out trees and shrubs and manage the prairie. He has now turned it into an event that people pay a fee to attend and participate in the weekend prescribed burn on his property. Wagon rides, food and music have been added to the “experience,” and people have come from around the world.

Another example: “Even quiet can be an

agritourism asset,” Jantzen says and points out that metropolitan cities and DisneyWorld can’t sell quiet, but rural ranches can. “You can’t hear an individual bird call in the city. You can’t see the stars in the city or satellites move across the night sky. You’ve got to recognize what you have.”

2. Sell the sizzle. Jantzen says a key part of agritourism is marketing the sizzle that goes along with the steak. This enhances the guests’ experience and the memories that they cherish. For Jantzen, guided horseback rides among his Flint Hills scenery are the “steak” that he offers, but he’s added the sizzle by the stories he tells and the information he provides about the ecology, the history, and the region.

3. Don’t underprice. Jantzen says a common mistake is to set the price for services too low. Rather, he advises, “Be confident in what you offer. Price your services high enough so that when you get paid you feel rewarded.”

Jantzen suggests for every descriptive word you can add to paint a picture of your services offered you can add \$10 to the price. For instance, promoting a visit to a remote, charming, relaxing, peaceful ranch complete with a country-fresh breakfast, will start to garner more income.

4. Deal with logistics. Establish a name for your business, focus on what the business is about and what services will be offered, and have a website that effectively promotes that.

Liability must also be addressed for the business, but Jantzen says this should not be overwhelming. “Every business has risk; plan ahead and manage it.”

5. Cooperate with other businesses.

Jantzen says that by working with others in the tourism or agritourism venue, you can entertain guests more effectively. For instance, if one business focuses on horse rides, another offers dinner and entertainment, and still another provides a place to stay, guests have more options and more reasons to stay longer.

“Do what you are best at and pass guests around to other services offered in the area,” suggests Jantzen.

6. Make it enjoyable. Jantzen acknowledges that operating a successful agritourism business will take effort, but it also has to be enjoyable for everyone involved. “Agritourism is the entertainment and education business. You’ve got to make it fun,” he concludes.

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Samples from South Dakota

Agritourism can take on many forms — working ranches, farm stays, wineries, farmers' markets, corn mazes, pumpkin patches, tree farms and apple orchards are all examples of entities that can help bring tourists and extra income to rural enterprises.

Here's a sample of some of the agritourism venues currently entertaining and educating guests in South Dakota:

Crow Creek Guest Ranch

Todd and Cindy Larsen have been partners in this 3,700-acre ranch west of Belle Fourche for 16 years. They own Angus and a handful of Longhorns that Todd likes to use for calf roping. Five years ago, they built a lodge so guests could enjoy the ranch experience in the spring and summer, and antelope hunters could stay there in the fall.

Guests can do as little or as much as they like for a "real ranch experience." A woman from Germany comes by herself every year and helps with the branding and vaccinating. Visit www.crowcreekguestranch.com.



Prairie Sky Guest and Game Ranch

Bruce and Corinne Prins operate this 2,000-acre buffalo ranch in Veblen, and in addition to offering horseback riding packages that include a girl's horse camp and guided trail rides into rolling hills, they offer professionally guided trips for hunters and fishing enthusiasts.

In the summer, the ranch hosts Wednesday Night Pitch Fork Steak Frys and Friday Night South Texas Brisket Barbecue Dinners. They serve about 100 people for the dinners, which cost \$21 apiece. Visit www.prairieskyranch.com.

Backcountry Wagon Trips

These horse-drawn wagon rides, offered by Spring Valley Ranch, a working cattle and horse ranch near Custer, take guests through the heart of deer and elk country from June through September. The trips vary in length from 90 minutes to 3 hours, with snacks provided along the way. Down-home country music and chuckwagon dinners cooked in a Dutch oven are available in the evening upon request. For more information, call 605-673-4317 or visit www.springvalleyranch.org and www.backcountrywagontrips.com.



Growing opportunity

As America becomes increasingly urban, agritourism expert Jan Jantzen anticipates interest in agritourism will continue to grow. Currently, he says, demand far exceeds supply.

He explains, "People are longing to understand what goes on in rural America. They find our way of life magnetic, not just for the activities, but for the culture."

As an example of fulfilling that niche, Jantzen offers guided horseback rides on his Flint Hills ranch. The experience includes the horse ride and the scenery, as well as the information and stories Jantzen shares. He talks about the early settlers, Native Americans, wildflowers that were used for food or medicine, historic cattle drives and the history of the surrounding cattle towns.

"After a two-hour horse ride, I know them better than their city neighbors who they've lived beside for 10 years," he says. "People like — and are seeking — that connectedness. They are starved for relationships, and they come back with their families or friends to have the experience, too."

Providing that authentic experience is one of the keys to a successful agritourism venture, emphasizes Jantzen. "As long as you keep it authentic, informative and participatory, the demand is incredible for agritourism," he says.

"The demand is there and growing, and I see no end to it," he adds.