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Building Strong Network of Berry U-Pick Farms in Monroe County

U-Pick farms as a source of safe, fresh and local food

U-pick operations are a direct marketing channel where customers can harvest fruit or vegetables themselves in a pleasant on-farm setting, often paying a lower price and gaining decidedly fresher food.

Historically it was U-pick fruit farms that were the foundation of agritourism. They emerged in the United States when prices for some crops hit low levels in the 1930s and 1940s, failing to cover the production cost. This prompted some producers to allow customers to come to the fields to pick their own produce for purchase. The trend towards 'rural recreation', with people driving from the cities to the countryside for leisure, also increased the popularity of this type of marketing.

Besides the benefits of picking fresh berries, visiting a U-pick farm on a nice summer day can be a fun and relaxing activity, especially during the wide-spread closures keeping people at home. Loaded with nutrients and antioxidants, fresh berries have many health benefits that help boost our immune system. Some people pick berries for fresh consumption, some for a pie to be enjoyed later and some for long-term storage. In contrast with other U-pick fruits like apples, berries are more manageable as they can be kept in smaller containers and storage spaces. Crops such as berries that require intensive labor are well-suited for U-pick operations.

If done correctly, pick-your-own can be one of the safest direct ways of getting freshly harvested produce at time when supplies in the stores are limited, many consumers are wary of social contact at grocery store or there is a disruption in the food supply.

To strengthen a network of berry U-pick farms as a safe source of locally grown fresh produce, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Monroe County will conduct a needs assessment at berry U-Pick farms to learn what challenges farmers face. This will be done through a detail survey that was designed in collaboration with Cornell University faculty, Program Team Specialists and Small Business Development Center of Niagara County. The findings will be used to help

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farmer by resource and educational program development, including COVID-19 safety guidelines addressing individual needs of each farm. Additionally, topics such as berry selection, marketing, customer service and satisfaction will be a part of this survey.

The '*Needs Assessment of Berry U-Pick Farms in Monroe County*' is a one-year project funded by the Genesee Valley Regional Market Authority and administered by CCE-Monroe. Its goals are to create a network of locally sourced fresh food, increase selection of berry fruit available to consumers, provide safe, more environmentally sound food system and grow awareness of local agriculture while enhancing farmers' profitability through greater customer visitation.

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