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## Ep. 174 How to Start an Agritourism Business to Diversify Farm Income

Interview with Matt Stephens, author of "Adventures in Agritourism: A Manual for Diversifying Your Farm Income."

By [Podcast Team](#)

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*Are you making an agritourism business plan? Learn how to start an agritourism business to diversify your farm income with added-value products and experiences.*

**In this episode of Mother Earth News and Friends**, we're talking agritourism with Matt Stephens. Matt has been a guest on our podcast before and has written articles and spoken at our MOTHER EARTH NEWS Fairs numerous times. This year, MOTHER EARTH NEWS is proud to be publishing his new book, [Adventures in Agritourism](#)! To celebrate that, podcast team member Kenny Coogan chats with Matt about his book and how anyone can follow their dreams to create a viable agritourism business.

### Podcast Transcript: How to Start an Agritourism Business

**Kenny Coogan:** Good day everyone, and we appreciate you for joining us on another exciting Mother Earth News and Friends podcast. I am Kenny Coogan, and today we are accompanied by Matt Stephens. We are going to learn about diversifying your farm and hobby farms [00:01:00] income. Matt Stephens is the author of the new book, "Adventures in Agritourism: A Manual for Diversifying Your Farm Income."

Look for Matt at our 2023 upcoming Mother Earth News Fairs. Welcome to the program, Matt.

**Matt Stephens:** Good to be here. Thank you.

**Kenny Coogan:** How do you see the community of agritourism being a tide that lifts all family farms? Because you mentioned that in your introduction, in your new book.

**Matt Stephens:** People come together around a family farm. I mean, by nature. Family and farming have gone back a long time and the, the way society is now, it gives us an opportunity to grow our family outside of our fences and we're able to bring in other families and have them be a part of an experience that most people don't get a chance to be a part of anymore.

And just because the way a hundred years ago, everybody moved to the city and now we're giving them an [00:02:00] opportunity to come back to the land and really find out where their food comes from.

**Kenny Coogan:** Very good. And that brings me to my next point. In your book, you describe a story you heard about a tour taking place on a farm. As their guide squeezed a handful of milk from one milking cows, somebody said, "What will they think of next?" Now the problem of that, of course, is that that came from the teacher. Can you further explain why is it important to connect and educate the consumer with the farmer?

**Matt Stephens:** We, again, I keep going back to the, the phrase we as a society have gotten further and further away from our food and where it, where it originates, where it comes from, and that's caused a lot of problems and a lot of misunderstandings.

Yeah, no, it was a true story. I was sitting in the back row and the speaker that was up in front of us was describing this cuz they were given a farm tour on their farm and the teacher was blown away by where milk came from. [00:03:00] And that actually struck fear in my heart that educators are teaching our kids and not knowing the big picture, the whole picture.

I myself am an educator. I've taught public education for over a decade, off and on in different arenas, but that's why I think it is very important for us as farmers and people of the land to have an education component on our farm is to alleviate some of those misunderstandings.

**Kenny Coogan:** I also. Well, I taught middle school agriculture for a long time, and we would work the state fairs and people would always be confused and surprised on where brown milk came from, where brown eggs came from, what part of the egg is the chicken and which part of the egg is the food source for the baby chick. Yes. So I'm right there with you. There's definitely a disconnect.

# Considerations for Your Agritourism Business Plan

**Kenny Coogan:** So agritourism is a little bit about, you know, [00:04:00] giving tours on your farm, but of course there's a lot of other venues that you could do. So before we get into that, what are some considerations for beginning an agritourism operation? Like what should, if somebody wants to open up their firm, what should they be thinking about?

**Matt Stephens:** One of the first questions I get asked, because when, when I go across the country and I, I speak on a agritourism, the first, a lot of people want to know about the insurance. That is a, is a, is a component that is a big component of what you need to understand.

When you go into business of any kind, you need to be protected. You need to protect not only your business assets, you need to protect your personal assets. Cuz a lot of times our agritourism is gonna be on the same property as our personal property, our home, our homestead, our true homestead if, if you will.

And so the insurance that you need to, to get into is very region specific, but it's [00:05:00] also specific to what type of agritourism you're in. What is your business model and what you need to cover. Now, so a lot of people will give me the answer. Well, there's no one size fits all answer, and I wish I could. I wish I could tell everybody, okay, this is, you need point A, point B, point C.

But what it comes down to is what are you doing on your property and where's that located? Finding a, a knowledgeable, reputable insurance agent is a must because....

**Kenny Coogan:** I'm giggling because I have a carnivorous plant nursery. I opened it up to do a make and take terrarium class on my property. As a, you know, as a value added, agritourism, people come on the property, they build a little terrarium and you know, you and I know what a terrarium is.

**Matt Stephens:** Yes, sir.

**Kenny Coogan:** But when I talk to the insurance [00:06:00] company, they go, "So they're gonna be building greenhouses on your property?" And I had to inform them that no, these are tiny, 14 inch by 14 inch by 14 inch jars basically. And that, that changed their opinion on how much I needed to be covered. Yeah.

**Matt Stephens:** Yeah. And, and that's what it comes down to a lot is we have to educate everybody, everybody around us, what it is that we're doing. I tell stories in the book, not only mine, but other agritourism operations across the country. We have to these, not only

do you need a good insurance agent, you need to talk to a lawyer. You need to talk to some professionals. Make sure you got, you have your taxes covered. They have to be educated as well, and it's a painful process. But you may have to interview a bunch of agents, a bunch of professionals before you find the ones that can understand what you're doing. It's 14 by 14 inches, not.... and you know, and [00:07:00] so it's carnivorous plants not, you know, not a danger to people, you know? So the misconceptions out there on a lot of what we do is huge.

**Kenny Coogan:** So categories of agritourism include entertainment programs, educational operations, and product-based with value-added experiences. So I wanna talk about each one of them.

So Matt, what are some types of entertainment programs that farmers can add to their farm homestead for additional income?

**Matt Stephens:** The ones that are most well known in, in our area, and a lot of what we talk about across the U.S. is gonna be [pumpkin patch](#) for the Halloween season. It's gonna be Christmas trees, uh, for the Christmas season, the time.

And so then it kind of breaks down into some of the minor holidays, Easter events, Easter egg hunts, that sort of thing. To add the entertainment factor is pretty much what you do on your farm. [00:08:00] Whether, you know, I've seen places with, you know, you have your hay rides or your educational farm tours, bow and arrow shooting into hay bales, also pumpkin painting. It could be painting gords in the, you know, the different off-seasons. So it, it can get down into the regional areas of what's popular in your area. How do, how do you make that fun?

**Kenny Coogan:** I went back home to Buffalo, New York recently, and I saw this area that used to be a corn maze every fall. And my parents said, "Oh, they haven't done it in so many years, probably because of Covid."

But can you just talk a little bit about corn mazes? Is it negative for the farmer because they can't use that property or.... like in my mind, so many people would be coming to the corn maze that would offset what you would get to feed the livestock. But I don't, I'm not too sure. So what do you think about corn mazes?

**Matt Stephens:** I think they're a good thing. I think because you're not, you know, you may have several hundred acres of field corn for, [00:09:00] you know, animal feed production, or even, you know, different, the different kinds of corn production. But that means you have the equipment to plant the corn. That means you have everything ready

to go, and you can take a smaller patch or a smaller area and simply just plant less than an acre. It could be more than an acre, but. Depending on what you have available, and that's what we talk about a lot is what are your assets? What are your liabilities? You know, your asset in, if you're already planting corn, you have everything you need to do a corn maze. And so you go in, you plant the area with corn.

The flip side: Now this is some insider secrets here.

**Kenny Coogan:** Oh, good.

**Matt Stephens:** Not all corn mazes are corn, depending on your time of year and the, the season. So in this area, I know farmers that plant sorghum or they, they, they plant these different types of hay grasses that are similar to corn as far as the height, and you [00:10:00] can't see over it, you don't want to jump through it, that sort of thing.

So corn may not, corn mazes may not all be corn. And so here on our farm we have any given year, we would have up to 50 acres of bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes. And so with that kind of abundance, we cut mazes in the flowers. Yes, it takes away some of the seed production just like it would in the corn. However, it's using what you have to the best of your ability.

**Kenny Coogan:** When you talk about it like that, the ROI (the return on investment), it seems pretty good because you're gonna be getting so many people. How long can a corn maze last or, you know, I'm sure it depends on what state, but I guess it's a fall activity around Halloween, Thanksgiving, maybe.

**Matt Stephens:** It is, but, but a lot of times, like in this area, the corn will be dead and dried before the, the Halloween season really gets started and so you need something that's gonna be more of that fall har-, that [00:11:00] later fall harvest. Kind of don't want people running through your dried corn because they're gonna be rough on your farm to begin with, just not knowing. The public is generally that way and it's, it's no harm or no foul. However, you're again, that those seasons when you know, if you're running a late summer to early fall, you know, corn would be great. Corn would be fine. It all, you know, and, but if you need that later, I would pick a different production product.

**Kenny Coogan:** All right. Very good. So those are some of the entertainment programs.

**Kenny Coogan:** What about the educational operations that you could add to add income?

**Matt Stephens:** One of the things I talk about in the book is finding your passion, finding your heart, and this goes back to the education part of it. What do you love? What is it about farming, agriculture, and the outdoors that you absolutely love and being true to that?

You can teach anything if you love what you're doing, and it becomes very, very easy. A lot of people have trouble [00:12:00] or think they have trouble getting up in front of a crowd and teaching something. So a lot of people say, I can't do that. Well, there's a workaround to that too, but if you're truly passionate about it, I find a lot of people are able to teach more than they think they can.

Finding that passion can be the most difficult thing, but once you find it, hang onto it with both hands, because two, two farmers side by side growing the same crop can coexist and that, you know, I, I talk about that a lot, whether it's in person or in print, that as long as you're true to your, your heart and your plan, you're able to share a fence line with somebody that's growing, whether it's grapes or corn or peaches, and you have your own niche in that market.

**Kenny Coogan:** I live in Tampa, Florida, which is a pretty big city, and when I was doing those monthly terrarium classes, I also started doing monthly intro to chicken keeping classes because I have quite a bit of chickens and ducks, [00:13:00] and I would cap it at, I think 10 people per month. I have a little, you know, side building that we would go into. It would be a two hour class. I would walk 'em through the property. I would show them all the chicken coops because I, you know, I have three different designs. I would tell them the pros, the cons. We would look at the eggs, we would look at the birds, and then we just doing the walking. that would take up an hour and then we would sit down, I would show 'em a couple materials and in quotes, "all they got" was like a three page PDF, you know, a three page word document about what I talked about.

But that was a very, very popular class for people who had no idea about how to raise chickens. I never did it around Easter, but I would do it, you know, a month or two before that and then after that and people would say, you know, "We've wanted chickens for so long, we had no idea where to start." And then after I did that, I was able to partner up with a local feed store.

So that [00:14:00] was, I recommend it to everyone. I, for me, it worked out really well because I'm in a city. And the city allows chickens. I don't know how successful somebody would be if they're in a farm surrounded by other people who already had chickens and



poultry, but I think that was an easy educational add-on that I could offer to the community.

**Matt Stephens:** Oh, absolutely. That, and that's you taking, taking advantage of your, your local demographic of people that want that information and using your assets that you have already available and just extending it out and, and that's, that's how you develop a year-round program as opposed to one event or an event every so often.

If that agritourism component is your main stake, and that's, you know, how we want to grow slow.

**Kenny Coogan:** Yeah, you don't want a lot of overhead. All right, so what are some product-based value-added experiences that farmers could try to add [00:15:00] income?

**Matt Stephens:** It's up to your imagination when it comes to value added and the products you can produce off the farm, because even if you are, you know, say, a large beef operation, you can teach butchering classes. And then, you know, then the products that come from that even go into the, you know, leather production and the, the uses, you know, if your cattle have horns, then you can go into classes specifically on how to, you know, manipulate the horn into products.

And so it's basically taking all the parts of whatever it is you grow, whether it's cattle, whether it's chickens, whether it's blueberries, blackberries, and all the different things. I know a lot of people are into elderberry right now. You have the elderberries themselves fresh, you have dried elderberries, you have elderberry flowers. Not to mention when you start getting into the herbs and the tinctures and those sort of products, you have those products themselves. But then again, you have that educational [00:16:00] components of being able to teach the class on this is how you do it.

**Kenny Coogan:** Yeah, I remember going to a couple of farms when you're mentioning that one was an emu farm. In addition to the meat, they showed like [lip balm](#) cakes made out of emu eggs, decorated emu eggs. And then another per another farm. Um, I remember they were teaching how to, teaching how to make homemade bread, and then they had their honey day and they had their jam day. Yeah.

**Matt Stephens:** So the value, value-added products, again, it goes back to your imagination and what are, you know, what grows in your area, that becomes seasonal. If you're doing a fresh product, when you get into the [elderberries dried or any of the dried fruits](#) or that sort of thing, you know, then, then that gives you a little bit of time to, to, you know, fill in later in, in the year as far as preserving your harvest.

# Are Farm Stays Right for Your Farm?

**Kenny Coogan:** So another, uh, growing trend is to have people stay in your spare [00:17:00] bedroom, guest house, or even a renovated silo. What should we think about before opening up the farm to guests who are sleeping over?

**Matt Stephens:** It's it, it is a trend. It's a really strong trend, but you really have to ask yourself, you know, do you mind people, you know, in agritourism to begin with? Do you mind people being on your farm? Do you mind people being in your barn? Do you mind strangers being in your house? Do you mind strangers being in your bathroom? Okay. And, and people usually really balk at that. I lose most people with strangers being in their bathroom. When the, when I look out on the audience and they're making faces, it's it, it's great fun. That's my test too: How comfortable are you with people and how comfortable are you with strangers? And again, going back to being true to yourself. Just because it's popular and just cuz you think you might be able to make some money at it, don't have somebody stay in your spare bedroom. Remodel the barn. If the barn is the limit, remodel the barn.

Have that as your working operation for [00:18:00] those guests to stay over. But whatever your limit is, be true to that. And that gives you kind of that comfort zone, that cushion know. I know even some people that bring in camping trailers or yurts or any of the smaller, tiny homes and set up little villages, those sort of things.

But they put those away from their personal space and that has some pros and cons to it as well. Having a separate entrance into your, your farm to go to your stay on the farm community. But that's that growing trend. So you need to be, again, going back to your question is how comfortable are you with those people there? And then you start taking a look. So once you find your internal space, then you start looking at those insurances and those safety issues, especially if you have animals or livestock on your property, that's gonna have to be handled, mitigated with fences and, and that sort of thing.

**Kenny Coogan:** Now, something else that you mentioned in the book was, to remind [00:19:00] yourself that your farm is a working farm, and that the guests are just, like, the add-on. Like, you can't just stop all production, right?

**Matt Stephens:** Correct. And I don't wanna talk negative about the guests because they're, you know, they're, they're our guest. But the primary reason for you, you're in farming up first, is your farm. They are allowed into your world and they, they need to know that.



And a lot of people come onto a farm thinking they can pet the bull. That's not gonna work. And they have to be educated upfront before they get hurt, and that's something you never want.

**Kenny Coogan:** All right. Good point. We're gonna take a quick break in our conversation to hear a word from our sponsor, and when we return, we will learn the best ways for folks to utilize the seasons in their agritourism operations.

## Learn More at the MOTHER EARTH NEWS Fair

**Jessica Mitchell:** Have you ever wanted to meet our podcast presenters [00:20:00] in person or take workshops from them? You can by going to one of our many Mother Earth News Fairs each year. You can take hands-on workshops, attend information-filled presentations, and shop from our many vendors specializing in DIY ideas, homesteading, natural health, and more.

Our 2023 Fair schedule includes Fairs in Texas, Kansas, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. And you can catch Matt Stephens at our upcoming Texas Fair this February. Learn more about all our Fairs by going to [www.MotherEarthNewsFair.com](http://www.MotherEarthNewsFair.com). Use the code FAIRGUEST for \$5 off at checkout. Whichever Fair you choose to join us at, we're looking forward to seeing you there.

Come visit your Mother at the 2023 Mother Earth News Fairs. And now back to our episode with Matt [00:21:00] Stephens.

## Seasonal Agritourism Activities

**Kenny Coogan:** We are back with Matt Stephens, author of "Adventures in Agritourism: A Manual for Diversifying Your Farm Income." So Matt, how important are the seasons when it comes to agritourism? You kind of hinted it earlier, but how can we utilize the seasons in our favor?

**Matt Stephens:** Well, seasons have pros and cons. When you, depending on your location, what is the, the time of year where you have the biggest, the best stretch of decent weather? Because you do not want to get weathered out, especially if you're running a one time a year, get together on your farm. You don't want to be weathered out and then be done for the, for the entire year.

Then you start taking a look at those seasons and what's prevalent in your area. You know, for us in central Texas, bluebonnet season is a huge thing. You know, sometimes they only

last a couple of weeks at peak blooming season. [00:22:00] Sometimes they last, you know, a month or more, may get six weeks, six weekends in there for people to come out to the bluebonnet. So that's a, that's a seasonal thing, but it's also a regional thing. Then you get into the, you know, of course the, the Halloween season, the Christmas season, along with the Christmas, you have other holidays built into that time of year and those different holidays are stronger in certain areas. And so that can be a serious draw for that time, that season.

Now you, you have, you know, holiday seasons, but you also have weather seasons, you know, spring, summer, winter, fall. And so again, that plays into the weather and what are your best odds of having a successful year, depending on those seasons. But then you break it down into harvest seasons. And so when you get into the harvest seasons, are you harvesting blackberries? Are you harvesting sweet corn? I know we've talked about sweet, you know, corn mazes and that sort of thing, but you [00:23:00] could be running sweet corn. Peaches again, just like the blue barns. I've had 'em last. We, we have a small peach orchard on the farm. We've had 'em last for two weeks. We've had 'em last for two months going into three months.

And so just depending on the seasonal harvest of whatever you have available in, in your, your area.

**Kenny Coogan:** All right, so we're talking about agritourism. So when you mentioned the peaches are only good for two or three weeks or blackberries or whatever.... Are you saying that people are coming onto the property to harvest them? How, how does that relate to agritourism?

**Matt Stephens:** On my farm, we've had people come onto the farm and, and do a pick your own where they harvest their own and take 'em with them. We talk about what they could do as far as preserving 'em and preserving the harvest after they get to the house or whatever.

I've had other, other people that I interviewed for the book, they go more into the food preservation on their locations and that sort of thing. But most of what I've [00:24:00] been involved in personally was the pick your own. For those type of events. But that's, that's the reason why I brought in six other farmers was to get a broader scope of what's happening in the, the realm of agritourism, but also the realm across the nation so that we get a better view of no one expert, but we have experts in our fields.

## Managing Pick-Your-Own Farms

**Kenny Coogan:** I'm gonna throw a couple people under the bus, like my friend Mona. When she goes blueberry picking, and when my mother-in-law goes blackberry picking, are the farmers concerned, or are we considering how much they are eating out of the hand versus what they put in the basket?

**Matt Stephens:** I, I, I would say it is a concern, but just like at the grocery store, you may let your kids eat a few of the grapes to keep the kid quiet, to get 'em out the door. I find when it comes to a pick your own, they're only gonna be able to eat so much.

**Kenny Coogan:** That's true.

**Matt Stephens:** But if you have a quality product, [00:25:00] it's gonna make 'em want more. They're gonna want to take more of what you, you love to their house to make it their own.

**Kenny Coogan:** So they sample the product and then they want more?

**Matt Stephens:** Yes.

**Kenny Coogan:** All right. That's good. I'm, I was good and nervous. Like mostly for ethics, but of course financially. Are there other things that listeners should consider when starting pick your own event? Like I know you mentioned that they're pretty rough, like walking through the corn fields and stuff. I did a, like, [pick your own pumpkin](#) once and those vines are already dead, so it, it probably doesn't really matter that much. But do you have any other advice for pick your own type events?

**Matt Stephens:** Definitely that, um, you need to make sure that the age of the kids that are coming out, like especially, you know, strawberries come to mind. You have a kid that finds it funny to run down the middle of a strawberry row, kills your crop. And so there, there has to be the, the signage involved. And, and when people [00:26:00] check in, we talk about giving them a basket. Let 'em pay for a basket up front so they can fill that and, and. There's benefits to to, to that, but also having those kids and having that age limit on there, have something else for the kids kiddos to go do, have them supervised by an older sister, mom, dad, and then everybody else goes to the field to pick.

Having that diversion is, is a good idea. Dwayne Hall and I, we bounced around the idea of having a certification program upfront before you can even go into your field to pick, because again, the last thing you need to do as a starting operation, especially small operations, you don't want to be done in one weekend because everybody tore up your year-long harvest.

And so maybe having a certification program in the beginning saying, Hey, I know what I'm looking for as far as ripe fruit, uh, I know. Which ones to be picked and which one's not. Don't [00:27:00] just grab everything that's on the vine, you know? So having, having some education component up front to where they don't pick you out, but also maintaining a volume amount per weekend by giving them those baskets, those certain size cup – a large, you know, not a bucket unless they pay for a bucket – and you've got a big enough operation, but it, it's limiting what's harvested and, and you would be able to go into your field and say, okay, sorry folks. We're picked out for the day. We have to move on. You can be first in line next weekend or whatever, but managing your property, because it is your farm, it is your working farm, and this is your livelihood. So you've gotta protect it in those kind of ways.

**Kenny Coogan:** I do like the idea of the certificate. It reminds me of, there's one type of pepper that the actual farmers and the actual pickers, they have this little card that shows you all the different shades of the pepper and you can only pick, you know, the two on the farthest right. And I [00:28:00] think that would be pretty easy to replicate for a lot of different crops. So little kids can hold their card up to their fruit and say, Nope, this one's not ready.

## Timing Events for Your Agritourism Business Plan

**Kenny Coogan:** So these pick your owns, they're pretty timely. What are the pros and cons of having like seasonal events or monthly events compared to a big one time a year event?

**Matt Stephens:** The, the big one time a year event. Again, if it's, say one weekend, you take the chance of it getting rained out or something else happening and shuts you down for, for that one, and then you, you're off for a year. One of the, the programs I talk about is having smaller events throughout the year that keeps it fresh in your mind that, Hey, you know, my farm is out here, my farm is available. We're doing this, this, and this. Small weekend courses, small weekend courses, and then for the month of November, we have a month long celebration every weekend and have that or one major weekend. In the marketing side of having an agritourism [00:29:00] operation, you want to keep spinning that plate. You want to keep your name in front of the people, and so, can you have a successful one-time event and nothing else on your farm? Yes, absolutely. That's when your social media kicks in and you want to keep your name up front and, and in their, almost in their face to, to remind them, Hey, November's, our time of year. December's our time at this farm, whichever event is yours. It's kind of a mix and match. What do you want? The one big event takes a lot of prep work. It takes a lot of lead time to, to get that and pull one of those off or the weekend events, you can, almost, depending on your

setup on your farm, you can actually do those as a popup event to where you have a bumper crop of blackberries and you're not picked out where you thought you would be, Hey, popup event, you know, sail on blackberries this weekend and then shoot that out there in your advertising, get people [00:30:00] out there. You get a harvest, you get extra boost of income. But it's mixing and matching the big and the small to whatever fits your want and desire. Because if you don't want 10,000 people on your farm in a weekend, don't invite 'em. That was one thing that we were always known for on our farm is we have family size gatherings. We don't have 10,000. We don't want 'em, no offense. We want to keep it small. We want to keep it just that small group to, it's more manageable, you know? Agritourism is not the only thing we do on our farm. So we want to maintain the hay crop, we wanna maintain the sheet crop. You know, we don't want to stress out those animals with people moving through the area.

So it just depends on what is your niche market and what you want to maintain on your farm, whether the big or the small is appropriate for you.

**Kenny Coogan:** I like when you said agritourism is not the only thing you do on your farm, [00:31:00] because let's say you do, you know, one event every six months. I think that is a great idea to have those social media teasers. Hey, the seeds are in the ground, the first two leaves are up, the flowers are in two weeks we're gonna have fruit. And that's how you stay in front of the audience. Yeah, that's a great advertising idea.

Are there hurdles or are there problems that keep coming that you could provide some solutions to the, to the listeners? When you're starting with agritourism, is there something that everybody kind of encounters?

**Matt Stephens:** Yes, a lot of times it's ourselves and getting over our internal dialogues, getting over our internal stuff can be a big hurdle. And it's one of those things where you look out there and you say, oh, they're successful doing, you know, that farm over there is successful doing a pumpkin patch and with a carnival style atmosphere around it, so they're making money, so I'm gonna go do that and [00:32:00] that's not what's in you to do and that's not, maybe not even what your farm, you know, has to offer. Because I'm also a big believer in being true to your farm, being true to Mother Nature has designed your farm in such a way that it's going to be productive doing certain things. Can you force it? Yes. When you force things, it, it costs a lot more money. So if you follow your neighbor down the road of a pumpkin patch with carnival attractions and that's not what you want, you're gonna wind up not liking it hating it, and you won't stay in that arena very long. Now it's an educational, you know, wonder that you figure out, okay, so that's not what I like to do, so I want to go do this.

So that's part of the internal dialogue that you have to work out in, you know, the starting the, the agritourism and I, I think agritourism is more personal than, say, starting a small business. I've done 'em both. I've started, you know, [00:33:00] pure business outside of the farm, ran those operations, that sort of thing.

And then getting into the agritourism, I was the example I gave you just then about the, Hey, they do that so I can too. I wasn't in it and I didn't stay in it. And I went back to my bluebonnet and I went back to my family events and that sort of thing. So I, I dealt with that internal dialogue to define that and that find your niche market and then that sets you on the path of success.

And, and also to go along with that is don't start too big. Don't quit your job and jump into this thinking, I'm going to, yeah, I'm wholehearted. Here we go. Start small and learn. Even to the point of volunteering with other farms, you know, if you can get, you know, get hired on. I mean, I've, I've worked for other agritourism even after I started my own, I wanted to know different areas. I wanted to know different arenas. I worked the parking lot and I learned a lot by working somebody else's parking lot [00:34:00] on how to design a parking lot, how to design flow, and I got to talk to a lot of the other people that had been working there for years. I think a lot of times we get stuck in the idea that we, Hey, we have to make a million dollars out of the gate, or we're not gonna be successful.

Well, you have to define what is success to you. Is educating people and not losing money success? If you make \$1 over what your costs are is that success? Or do you want to eventually work into, you know, \$10,000 a year, \$50,000 a year? What is your definition of success? But that goes again, back to your internal dialogue and what you want out of this, and the rabbit trail I was running down is, as opposed to a small business of selling lemonade, if you're not a lemon grower, if you're doing a, a, a small business, that's less personal than if you're inviting people onto your farm. When you invite people onto your farm, that is very, very personal. That's [00:35:00] your space, that's your, the extension of your heart into other people's lives. And so getting true to that, getting over that and getting on with that, I think is one of the biggest hurdles for people when the, when they start, and even if you already have that working cattle operation or bison operation and you wanna start adding in, you still have to be true. You still have to be true because you may be running bison year round, but you love strawberries. and you want to teach, you know, you want people to love strawberries too. So it's two things that look like they're polar opposites, you know, one you do for the income, one you do for the love of it. And I think that's a, a big chunk of what people need going into agritourism.



# How to Start an Agritourism Business that's Part of the Community

**Kenny Coogan:** Working in volunteering with another farm is a great idea. Like I mentioned, I do carnivorous plants, but I was so surprised, I really was surprised by how generous the fruit tree [00:36:00] person was, and the herb person was, and the house plant person is. We're at the same events and you, you would think we're competing. But we're actually not, and people are just much kinder than the news and social media would allude to.

**Matt Stephens:** Yeah, that's, that's what I've found too. When I go to other people, whether I'm working for 'em or just talking to 'em, we're not, you know, and I'll talk about this a lot, is we're not in competition when we're true to ourselves.

We're not in competition with anybody else but ourselves. Now, just because you're in agritourism and they're in agritourism, doesn't mean they're gonna be friendly to you. I mean, when I, when I was writing this book, some of the owners out there, when they found out I was writing a how-to book and getting people into it, they were less than cordial, but they didn't have an open mindset and, and, and a growth mindset to know that there's a room for all of us.

We, you know, us as a society, we've gotten behind the, the food and growing curve so far. There's plenty enough [00:37:00] room for all of us to be in agritourism and really not compete, but actually compliment each other's programs and help each other grow in what we have laid down to do.

**Kenny Coogan:** Thank you so much, Matt, for speaking with us. Our conversation on agritourism has been very insightful and I look forward to your book being published, "Adventures in Agritourism: A Manual for Diversifying Your Farm Income," and I'm more excited about seeing you at a Mother Earth News Fair in person.

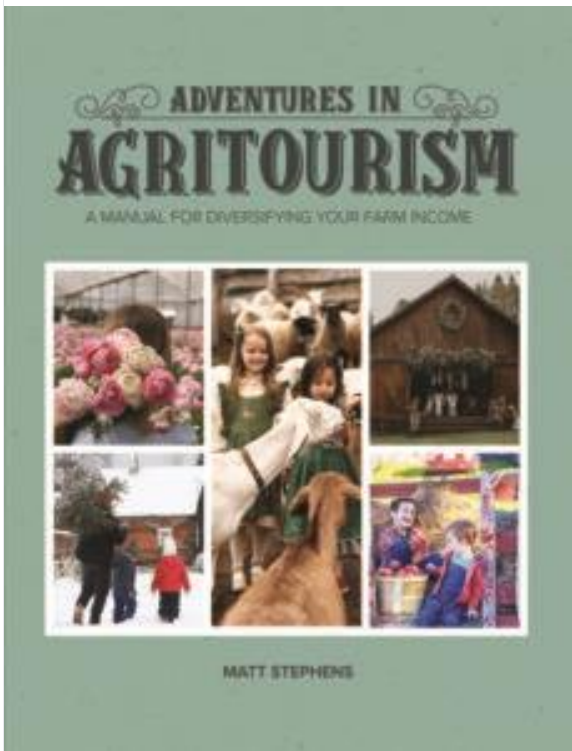
**Matt Stephens:** Yes sir. I will be speaking at at least four of the [Mother Earth News Fairs](#) this coming year in 2023.

## About Matt Stephens



Matt Stephens was born into a part-time homesteading family. Growing up on a 65-acre central Texas hobby farm, he learned from his parents and his rural Depression-surviving grandparents. Matt developed a love for all things that lived and came from a farmstead lifestyle. Life took him across the state of Texas, only to deliver him back to the family farm. He expanded this familiar piece of land past a hobby and into a full-time endeavor to include more than 300 acres, owned and leased. Now with a family of his own, Matt looks to instill the same upbringing in his children and teach others from his experiences.

## Additional Resources:



Order Matt's book, [Adventures in Agritourism: A Manual for Diversifying Your Farm Income](https://store.motherearthnews.com/products/adventures-in-agritourism)

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