

The Rock Ranch in Georgia is a great example of agritourism. The 1,500 acre ranch owned by the founder Chick-fil-A®, S. Truett Cathy was started as a Brangus cattle operation and in 1994; Mr. Cathy began offering tours to school groups and church groups; and hosting corporate and private events on the ranch.

All the activities on the ranch must meet Mr. Cathy's personal goals for the ranch by "Uniting families with the land and each other" and "Growing Healthy Families." Mr. Cathy and his manager, Jeff Manley, use the rural setting of the ranch and its natural resources to help children understand values.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to the ranch with other agritourism professionals and meet Mr. Cathy and Mr. Manley. The ranch is ideally located one hour from Atlanta and Columbus, and 40 minutes from Macon. They have an excellent website that gives an overview of the ranch and provides information on group tours and other activities at the ranch. Please visit www.therockranch.com for more details.

So, why are they such a great example? They have taken their assets and built on them. When we toured we asked how much of their cash flow for new activities came from the founder of Chick-fil-A®. Manley explained that his job was to make the agritourism operation self-sustaining and that he had the same struggles of other agritourism operations in the region. Each year they add or change something to keep their operation fresh and new for visitors.

The lay out of the ranch allows for several field trips to take place simultaneously offering different themes and providing the opportunity to host different age groups. While every agritourism operation will not have that opportunity, the way they structure their field trips can be duplicated. They focus on the fall and spring primarily when they have the most happening on the ranch for field trips. In the summer they offer more play time in a ranch setting. There are also numerous opportunities to visit the ranch during other times, but those must be planned for in advance.

How often and when can you host groups of people on your farm or ranch will depend on your access to a labor supply. Guests want to talk with someone who herds cows, rides the tractor or picks the garden. That person is usually someone who works on the farm. They don't have to have on pressed clothes; they need to look like they just stepped out of the cow pen. Your tour guides are part of the experience.

At The Rock Ranch, tours are planned around some of the horticulture crops allowing guests to help harvest. They offer six weeks of tours in the fall and spring and divide each week day into themes. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday the field trips include whatever flowers, vegetables and new born animals are on the farm. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, guests learn more about the ecology of the farm. Wildlife, worms, composting, trees and seed planting are just some of the subjects covered on those days.

In addition to group and school tours, they have dwellings located on the property they rent for overnight stays. Who would not want to wake up in such a beautiful place? They also have a rare collection of Conestoga wagons they use for overnight stays.

Using what you have and creating an experience is what Rock Ranch and other agritourism tourism operations are all about. For help in creating your experience visit our webpage, www.lsuagcenter.com/agritourism.