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## Highlights of the 2008 Agritourism Conference

The 2008 *Agritourism: Cultivating Farm Revenue* conference was held January 17-18 at Paris Landing State Park in Buchanan, Tennessee.

A total of 249 people attended the conference. Seventy-nine percent of conference attendees were from Tennessee. The remaining 21 percent came from 13 other states.

Conference evaluations were returned from 102 participants. Agritourism operators and farmers interested in agritourism accounted for 84 percent of respondents (42 percent each). Tourism industry professionals accounted for 5 percent, and agricultural industry professionals and/or educators made up 7 percent of respondents.

Fifteen respondents had attended both the 2005 and 2007 conferences. Eleven respondents attended only the 2005 conference or only the 2007 conference. First

time-attendees totaled 61 respondents.

A complete summary of evaluations can be found online at <http://cpa.utk.edu>.

In case you missed it or need a refresher, here are some highlights and resources from some of the sessions:

- Learn more about the keynote **Agritourism in Action** operations on the Web. Find out about Beggs Family Farm at <http://www.beggsfamilyfarm.com/>. Learn about Chaney's Dairy Barn at <http://www.chaneysdairybarn.com/>
- A new **Agricultural Sales Tax Guide** including information on agritourism-related issues is available on-line at <http://state.tn.us/revenue/taxguides/agricultural.pdf>. Contact the Department of Revenue with questions at [tn.revenue@state.tn.us](mailto:tn.revenue@state.tn.us) or 1-800-342-1003.

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## Cost-Share Program News

By Pamela Bartholomew, Agritourism Coordinator, Tennessee Department of Agriculture

Would you like to improve the infrastructure on your operation, expand your marketing efforts or attend educational programs for agritourism operators? What if you could do each of these things for up to half the cost? The Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) may be able to help you do just that through the Producer Diversification Cost-Share segment of the Tennessee Agriculture Enhancement Program (TAEP).

The purpose of TAEP is to increase farm income in Tennessee by encouraging farmers to expand and improve their operations. If you have attended a workshop or conference focused on agritourism that was sponsored by TDA or the University of Tennessee, you could be eligible for a reimbursement of 50% cost share, up to the maximum of \$15,000 per fiscal year. If you have not attended one of these events, you can apply



Attendees participate in a general session.



Participants try Agriculture in the Classroom activities during a concurrent session.



Thelma and Johnny Ring (left) steal the show during a performance by ventriloquist, David Turner.

for 35% cost share up to \$10,000 per fiscal year.

You can apply for cost share funding for marketing, infrastructure and educational opportunities. A few examples of marketing activities may include brochure development, Web site design, and the new Agritourism Tourist Oriented Directional Signs from TDOT. Examples of

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## Spotlight on Agritourism: Heritage Gardens

### Robin Schell Heritage Gardens – Our Roots Grow Deep

Greene County  
<http://www.heritagegardenstn.com>

*What products, services or attractions do you offer?*

Heritage Gardens offers several products and services from its professional nursery and on-farm retail store. Owners Robin and Bob Schell grow all the perennials sold from the farm and have started offering flowering and ornamental shrubs and trees. The operation also features display gardens, which the Schell's are planning to expand. Bob takes his services on the road by providing landscape design and installation services. The Schell's have recently added educational field trips for students through sixth grade.

*How long have you been in business?*

The Schell's have been in business for 10 years. They started with offering lawn mowing services and started the nursery about eight years ago.

*Why did you get into agritourism?*

After they were married, Bob managed his family farm in Greeneville, and Robin taught. They raised sheep on the farm for awhile and discovered it was difficult to make a living that way. They joined the corporate world and moved out of state. "But Bob had always wanted to be a farmer," says Robin, "and we wanted to raise our children on a farm." They looked for ways they could move back to the farm and make a living. After taking classes in landscaping and horticulture, they took the plunge and moved back to the family farm.

*What is unique about the operation?*

Robin says the atmosphere of Heritage Gardens makes it unique. Robin and Bob also grow old-fashioned plants people often ask for but cannot find other places.

*To what do you attribute your success?*

Robin attributes their success to determination, hard-work and continued education. They attend many classes, workshops and trade shows. "We have kept our eyes and ears open for trends. We look for niches we can fill that would work here [in our location]." Robin also attributes record-keeping. "The numbers talk," she says.

*What have been your biggest challenges?*

Finding dependable labor has been a big challenge for the Schell's. The freeze and drought in 2007 was an obstacle that cut into sales. Robin is afraid high gas prices may limit school field trips this year.

*How do you market your operation?*

Robin and Bob started marketing the nursery through newspapers, personal calls and letters to acquaintances and flyers, which worked better than anything else at that time. The Schell's have now expanded into other media including *Voice Magazine* – a magazine for women out of Johnson City, on the *Garden Girls* radio show out of Knoxville and local cable TV on channels such as HGTV, Fox News and the Food Channel. Robins says, "[Cable TV] works well. It is expensive but worth every penny." Heritage Gardens has also sponsored *Blooms Day* at the UT Gardens.

For field trips, Robin sends letters to principals and e-mails

teachers in the area. She gets addresses from school Web sites. She uses testimonials from other teachers, with their permission.

In addition, Robin and Bob can almost always be seen sporting their signature purple shirts and driving vehicles with their logo on the side. Robin added, "Speak to anybody and everybody who will let you." Robin has spoken to many civic clubs, garden clubs and in classrooms through a Partner in Education program.

*What are your plans for the future?*

Robin and Bob have many plans for the future of Heritage Gardens. Customer questions and requests have helped them plan to move into the agritourism realm even more. "They ask if they can bring a picnic out to the farm or if they could have their wedding here," says Robin. The Schell's plan to add restrooms and a gazebo for outdoor weddings. In the future, they hope to have a facility including a catering kitchen to host events indoors.

*What advice do you have for other agritourism operators or farmers interested in agritourism?*

"One thing that helped us out a lot when we started," says Robin, "is that we had a year's living expenses saved so we could live while the business was getting started." She suggests people go into a business with realistic expectations. "Do your homework and crunch your numbers. We knew going in it would take about five years to break even."

Robin also reminds people to "love what you do." She says it's been a great way for her kids to grow up. "They've learned a lot about work and money."



## Cost-Share

(Continued from page 1)

infrastructure may include parking lots, restrooms or retail buildings. Educational opportunities may include conferences such as Tennessee's annual agritourism conference and the North American Farmer's Direct Marketing Association Conference, which will be held in Georgia in early 2009. A new educational opportunity will be a multi-day, multi-state bus tour of agritourism enterprises being planned by the Center for Profitable Agriculture and sponsored by TDA.

The application period for the Producer Diversification Cost Share is June 2- August 1, 2008. To find out more about this program and other programs through TAEP go to [www.picktnproducts.org](http://www.picktnproducts.org) or call toll free 800-3420-8206.

## Update on the Tennessee Agritourism Association

By Vera Ann Myers, President, TAA

The Tennessee Agritourism Association (TAA) held its annual membership meeting at the 2008 Agritourism Conference. Officers were elected as follows: President – Vera Ann Myers; Vice President – David Black; Secretary – Robin Schell; Treasurer – Jeff Alsop; Parliamentarian – Johnny Ring.

TAA recently received a \$15,000 grant from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture. Part of the grant will be used to add a consumer marketing component to the association's Web site. It will include an interactive state map of member enterprises, photo gallery, quarterly events calendar and much more. All active and associate members will be included.

Also funded through the grant, three TAA officers promoted association member enterprises to the Tennessee Motor Coach Association Conference in January. More than 50 bus tour companies were encouraged to make stops at Tennessee farms. A packet of information will be sent to all bus tour companies. TAA active members are invited to provide a current brochure, one page flyers, etc., telling about their operation. Information should be mailed to Vera Ann Myers (3415 Gap Creek Road, Bulls Gap, TN 37711) by May 26, 2008.

Three TAA members attended the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association (NAFDMA) bus tour and

conference in Wisconsin in February. Travel was paid through the grant from TDA. Participating members shared information learned and materials gathered at a membership meeting held in March. Information will also be available at the next association meeting in June.

The next TAA meeting will be held, Monday, June 9, 2008, at Myers Pumpkin Patch & Corn Maze/ Myers Greenhouse noon EDT. A light lunch will be provided. RSVP by June 7 to [veraannm@comcast.com](mailto:veraannm@comcast.com).

TAA currently has 76 members. Visit [www.visittnfarms.com](http://www.visittnfarms.com) for a membership application.



## Conference Highlights (continued from page 1)

- The Tennessee Department of Transportation announced a change to the **Tourist-Oriented Directional Signs (TODS)** program for agritourism enterprises. Agritourism operations can opt to include an agritourism logo developed by the Department of Agriculture on their TODS signs. For

more information, contact Michelle Powell at TDOT at (615)741-0894 or Pamela Bartholomew at TDA at (615)837-5348.

- It is important to develop school tours and school tour marketing materials with educational curriculum standards in mind. **Curriculum standards** set by the

Tennessee Department of Education can be found on-line at <http://www.tennessee.gov/education/ci/curriculum.shtml>

Be sure to watch for news of the next conference to be held in January 2009 in future issues of this newsletter or on-line at <http://cpa.utk.edu>.

## Upcoming Events

### Tennessee Food Safety Certification "Domestic Kitchen" Course

May 29, 2008 in Nashville, TN  
Cost \$100

Registration is limited to 50 participants. Pre-registration with payment is mandatory. Contact Nancy Austin at 865-974-7717.

### Tennessee Agritourism Association Meeting

June 9, 2008 at 12pm EDT  
Myers Pumpkin Patch & Corn Maze  
Bulls Gap, TN

Contact Vera Ann Myers for more information at [veraannm@comcast.net](mailto:veraannm@comcast.net)

