Supporting Agricultural Awareness through Farm Tours in Palm Beach County

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Florida agricultural products are recognized internationally, yet most people associate Florida with beaches, theme parks, and space launches. Agriculture is Florida’s second-largest industry with economic impacts exceeding $100 billion. Palm Beach County (PBC) leads Florida in lettuce, specialty leaf, celery, radishes, Chinese vegetables, and rice, and leads the nation in sugarcane, sweet corn, sod, and green pepper production. The PBC agricultural proceeds consistently exceed all counties east of the Mississippi River in both sales ($1.3 billion) and economic impacts ($2.5 billion) (2013–14).

Within Florida, PBC ranks third for population (~1.4 million) and is the state’s largest county, with 36% (~456,000 acres) of its area devoted to agriculture. Ironically, most residents/visitors concentrated along the urbanized Atlantic coastline are largely unaware of the size, scope and impacts of agricultural production occurring within the western interior. Significant population demographics have little to no experience with the historical significance of America’s farming community, thus PBC Extension agents are delivering educational events that emphasize agricultural appreciation, identification with one’s food source and supply and connection with the farmers growing their food.

These events include multifaceted, educational bus tours tailored for a variety of audiences, including the general public, youth, retirees and international visitors. During the hectic peak growing season, farmers and packinghouses accommodate these tour groups and provide detailed explanations of their operations (Fig. 1). These in-the-field face-to-face interactions with local farmers are combined with a “working-lunch” at the UF/IFAS Everglades Research and Education Center for brief seminars by select research faculty, a popular activity that simulates a traditional grower meeting where attendees experience the dynamic connection between research, extension, and grower implementation. Attendees learn about local production challenges, environmental protection efforts, and extension success stories. They also receive a guidebook explaining extension services, program diversity, agricultural facts, farmer biographies, and local agronomic and horticultural production practices. The knowledge gained by attendees fosters an appreciation for agriculture, dispels misconceptions about farming and supports the connection between guests and their local food source.

One programmatic challenge has been the reluctance by tour bus coordinators to allow participant evaluations, but this issue will be resolved for future events. However, youth tour groups have been openly cooperative with program evaluations. Farm-to-School surveys demonstrate that knowing the name of the farmer who grew the leafy greens on display at the cafeteria salad bar positively influences the dietary choices made by elementary students. According to 3-year surveys of PBC 4-H youth participating in STEM education programs (which includes agricultural tours), the percentage of respondents that marked “agree” and “strongly agree” to the statement “I like science more than I used to” were 89% (2015), 85% (2014), and 90% (2013). When asked if they had realized any knowledge gain about science, the 3-year survey responses ranged from 84% to 92% for “agree” and “strongly agree.”

Agritourism is flexible and can be locally adapted. The unpredictable nature of agriculture is challenging and a back-up plan is advisable. Participants with mobility and/or hearing issues should be anticipated so that appropriate accommodations are easily implemented.

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