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Pick-It-Yourself Marketing Helps Solve Labor Problems

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Spiraling labor costs and a decreasing supply of farm labor have forced more than a few fruit and vegetable growers to switch to other crops or leave farming altogether.

Many other producers are taking a closer look at pick-it-yourself marketing in an attempt to overcome the farm labor dilemma.

The number of pick-it-yourself marketing operations has increased substantially during the last five years, notes Roger Ginder, extension crops marketing specialist at the University of Delaware. This practice may become even more popular as the labor market continues to tighten.

Ginder says locating efficient picking crews in the East is a serious problem, and there is no sign this situation will improve in the future. Part of this problem is attributed to the fact that many growers raise only two or three crops that have to be hand picked. Most good picking crews want continuous work throughout the summer rather than two or three weeks of work on one farm.

Stricter labor camp regula-

tions have resulted in higher in-direct labor costs for many farmers. Higher piece rates per unit picked have also contributed to the farm labor problems.

Of course, pick-it-yourself marketing requires some labor, but of a different type. Many farmers get by with family labor, while a minimum of outside help is necessary in most of the larger operations.

Local housewives, retirees, teenagers and college students can handle many of the tasks in pick-it-yourself operations. These employees are willing to work for a few weeks during the season and neither want nor expect employment beyond that period. In addition, farmers do not have to supply housing and many other fringe benefits.

Strawberries

At Valley Brook Farm near Townsend, Del., Nicholas J. Uniatowski had 15 acres of strawberries this year for pick-it-yourself customers. He started opening his berry patches to customers four years ago.

"We've had strawberries for over 10 years," explains Uni-

atowski. "But we were always able to obtain picking crews to harvest the crop until four years ago. That year, we had men signed up to pick our berries, but when the crop was ready to be harvested, the pickers didn't show up. We had the crop but no pickers so we opened the fields to the public."

"Last year was the first year we sold our entire crop of strawberries to pick-it-yourself customers," he adds.

Uniatowski had seven acres of strawberries for customers to pick that first year. His trade has grown so rapidly, however, that he has more than doubled his acreage since.

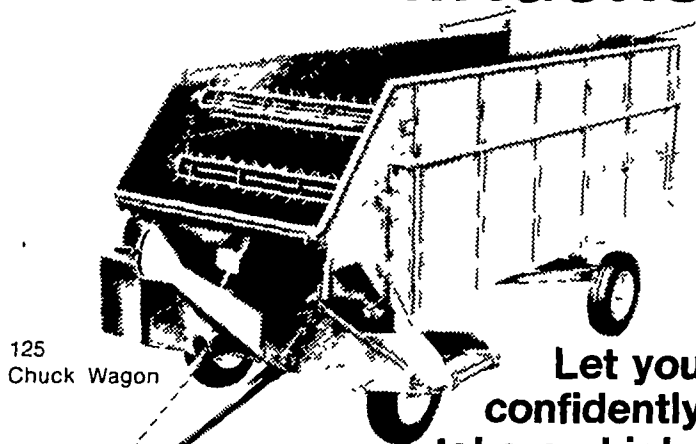
At Laurel, Del., Carlton Lowe has been marketing strawberries from the field for five years. He has close to eight acres of strawberries for his customers to pick.

"We still market some of our strawberries through a local auction, but there has been a definite increase in the demand for pick-it-yourself berries," says Lowe.

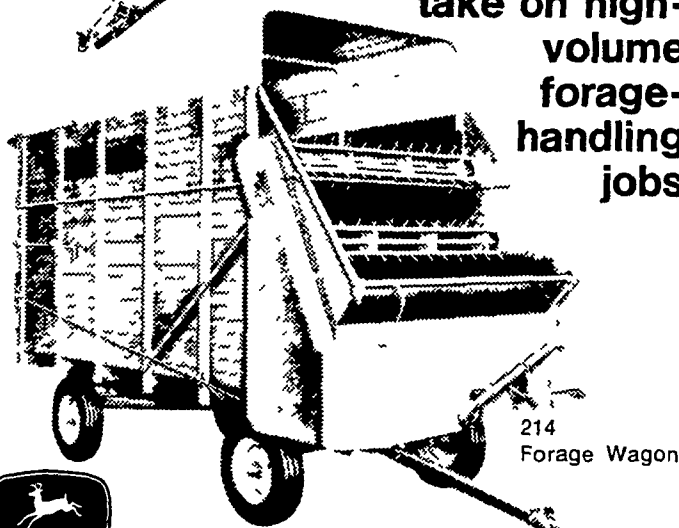
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