

## Open Farm Days has quickly become an Alberta institution

By Dianne Finstad

Farmers are stepping up to the plate to satisfy the growing appetite of Albertans who want to experience agriculture first hand.

More than 100 rural operations are on the hosting list for this year's [Alberta Open Farm Days](#) on the Aug. 18-19 weekend. Even those involved in agriculture may be amazed at the variety of places to visit in their own community and beyond.

"There's everything from the U-pick berry farms to dairy farms and cattle operations, and everything in between," said Tim Carson, CEO of the Alberta Association of Ag Societies, one of the presenting partners of the event.

"We've got 114 host farms registered for this year, which is a significant increase over last year. We are growing almost exponentially in the public's eye."

Now in its sixth year, the first Open Farm Days attracted some 3,000 visitors. Last year, that mushroomed to almost 60,000 farm visits.

Visitors can now find host farms in most of the more populated regions of the province, and there are a growing number of tour stops within a fairly short drive of each other.

"We've come to recognize that any time you can get two or three locations for a visitor to visit in a similar area, the public tends to focus on those," said Carson.

One of the host farms is Triple Lyoness Farm, a pasture-based mixed livestock operation near Westlock which is run by the three Carlyon sisters — Andria, Jessica, and Briana — and their parents, Rod and Janet. It's the third year they've been involved in the program.

"We decided as a family this was a good idea to get visitors to our farm so we can showcase our production practices and how we value agriculture and our environment," said Andria Carlyon. "We do a personalized tour, so we have a tour guide with each (visitor) and walk around and talk about our farm and show them things.

"They have different interests, so each year we try and take from their questions and what they wanted to see, and make it a better tour to try and encompass a



Questions from visitors make "you realize the other things you should be talking about and explaining," says Andria Carlyon of Triple Lyoness Farm. From left are Briana Carlyon, Derrick Rimmer, Andria, Rod, Janet, and Jessica Carlyon. *Photo: Triple Lyoness Farm*

broader scope of people. We're continually trying to get more interactive while still being as safe as possible."

This year that includes a wagon ride to the pasture to see the cattle grazing, walking with the turkeys, and even a roping demonstration.

So who are the people coming to explore rural Alberta and learn about their food sources?

"There are several different types of people who are going out," said Carson. "There's the 'family day' where we pack up the kids and go visit two or three different places. We've got other explorers who are trying to learn more about our food industry and what's happening in agriculture.

"And then we've got those who are really wanting to taste what's going on. They're looking at the culinary side, where they're coming out and enjoying a meal that's prepared based on the local food products."



*You don't have to have something unusual to be a host farm. Many urbanites are fascinated by the everyday things on farms and ranches. photo: Alberta Open Farm Days*

*Farming Smarter is one of many repeat participants for this year's Open Farm Days but many new operations are opening their doors to the public. photo: Alberta Open Farm Days*

That's been a developing aspect, especially with the partnership of the Alberta Culinary Tourism Alliance, which is helping chefs source locally grown ingredients. This year there are 14 culinary events.

The Open Farm Days initiative also involves both the Agriculture and Tourism departments of the provincial government, plus Tourism Alberta. The aim is to build rural tourism awareness, but there are economic spinoffs for agriculture as well. While visiting the host farms is free of charge, farmers can offer products for sale, noted Carson.

"Last year we had just over \$145,000 spent on Open Farm Days weekend on direct farm sales. Farmers are finding value in these people now becoming connected to them personally, as they are looking to supplement their grocery list from the farm."

Organizers are always inviting more farmers to open their doors to meet their 'customers' — and being a host farm may not be as hard as you think.

"We do what we do on the farm every day, and it doesn't seem very interesting to us," said Carson. "But the fact is two-thirds of the population in the province really don't go to the farm very often."



“So even just being able to see a combine up close or what your penning operation is like and ask general questions about your operation and how you’re involved is the lion’s share.”

Carlyon agrees, and said all of her family members hone their advocacy skills during Open Farm Days.

“Even within the day you get more practiced in how to talk about things and not use the industry jargon, so everyone can understand,” she said. “As more people ask questions, you realize the other things you should be talking about and explaining, because you’re so used to seeing it on the farm. But someone who is brand new has no idea what that thing is and they really want to know.”

And there’s nothing like seeing a farming operation first hand, she added.

“Anyone can visit and ask questions of the farmers and actually see what’s happening in agriculture rather than just seeing pictures or media and making decisions or choices based on that.”

The same principle applies to farmers, and Carson encourages farmers who are considering hosting, or who want to learn about a different type of farming, to visit farms in their area. A list of the host farms and culinary events can be found at the [Alberta Open Farm Days website](#). The site has a description of each farm and event, along with a trip planner.