

# Farm Diversification: Pick-Your-Own (PYO) & Farm Gate Sales — Littlewood Berry Farm

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I recently travelled out to see berry grower - Sophie Nichols - from Littlewood Berry Farm, who runs a successful PYO business near Richmond in Southern Tasmania. A first-generation berry grower, Sophie is also heavily involved in the management of the family's other agricultural ventures including sheep and cropping properties.



**The farm shop at Littlewood Berry Farm sells other products, such as ice cream, gin, coffee and local produce as well as the strawberries grown on site.**

Photo credit: Mark Salter, FGT

## Getting into berries

The berry PYO business started from an idea her father had while visiting the UK about 15 years ago. Sophie's dad came home quite enthusiastic to set something up, but it wasn't until a few years later after discussions with her father that Sophie decided to go ahead and began researching how a 'pick your own' stream would fit into their existing farming business.

Sophie initially consulted several similar berry businesses to see what works and what doesn't, and after discussions and much deliberation she decided on a model that might work for them. She admits there were a few mistakes and a lot of trial and error, but notes that *"at the end of the day it's all about what works for us"*.

Sophie's philosophy is simple *"do the best job we can and fine tune what we are already doing well"*. She started off planting 10,000 strawberry plants to get a feel for the business and to see which strawberry varieties worked best. Over the last few years plantings have increased to around 22,000 plants, with varieties including 'San Andreas' and 'Albion'.

## Meeting consumer needs

Littlewood Berry Farm's business is based on PYO strawberries, but also provides a retail storefront for ice cream, strawberry jam, fresh lamb, garlic, and sunflowers. The Littlewood Berry Farm site runs adjacent to Richmond Road which is a major tourist route in Tasmania's Coal Valley wine region.

This location provides plenty of tourists and passing traffic which meant a perfect location for a PYO business. This prominent location, combined with word of mouth,

FGT's Seasonal Produce Guide and Facebook are the primary tools Sophie uses to promote her business.

Littlewood Berry Farm also regularly supplies fresh strawberries to local restaurants when her plants are in season. Sophie has a background in hospitality which is helpful when dealing with the public and she continues to have many useful contacts in the industry.

Along with tourists and restaurants, Sophie also has a regular local following and particularly focuses on providing a family-friendly environment. This is supported by a clear focus on keeping the patch tidy, as well as the presence of a popular on-site coffee van run by her mother-in-law to help attract both locals and visitors.

Providing an educational experience is also seen as part of the Littlewood Berry Farm success story. The business is a popular destination for school excursions and holiday programs, and puts an emphasis on educating visiting kids about where our food comes from and how it is grown. She is quite happy to explain how it really works on a farm.

Sophie also likes to emphasise the seasonality of farm produce which in her case includes berries, livestock and cropping. Sophie quite often hears comments like "I thought strawberries grew on trees" or "Lamb comes from the shops"!

### Looking to the future

Sophie explains there is no move to expand the berry business at this stage, particularly as she is heavily involved in managing the many day-to-day activities on the family's farm sites. Like all berry businesses, trying to match supply with demand is a big challenge, particularly having strawberries available throughout the peak tourist period. Labour is also a challenge at times. Sophie relies on locals and prefers to retain the same crew each year. She employs up to 5 staff who are all locals and is putting one of her key staff through a farm apprenticeship program to help with staff retention.

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