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Meet local farmers at Open Farm Tours

Learn about agriculture and taste delicious produce

By [TARA FATEMI WALKER](#) |

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Tasting 10 types of figs, touring a farm and football field-sized greenhouses, watching your kids do a succulent plant activity: these opportunities and more are part of this year's Open Farm Tours which takes place Oct. 9-10.

It is important to note that anyone wishing to attend Open Farm Tours is required to pre-register through Eventbrite (see openfarmtours.com).

"This allows us to organize into smaller socially distanced groups," says Open Farm Tours co-founder Penny Ellis. All activities take place outdoors or in well ventilated areas.

There are eight family-owned sites; seven are in Santa Cruz County and one is in San Benito County. Some of these are not regularly open for public visits. Each has its own schedule (including some being only open one day, not both) and specific tours and/or activities.

Most venues are charging a small fee via Eventbrite to cover programming costs. All proceeds go directly to the farms. A few highlights: Fruitilicious Farm will offer at least 10 fig varieties for people to taste. The farm actually has more than 50 varieties, but not all are producing fruit yet.

Whiskey Hill Farm will have a guided tour; the property includes six giant greenhouses.

At Terra Sole Nursery, self-guided tours and the aforementioned kids' plant activity are available.

Thomas Farm's activities include a wreath-making demo, Live Earth Farm has a tomato U-Pick, and Luz Del Valle has an apple U-Pick and the chance to press fresh apple juice.

When Open Farm Tours launched in 2014, the one-day event had six participating farms. By 2019 it grew to two days and 14 farms. Because of the pandemic and the challenges that many farms and other businesses face, it has temporarily decreased in size.

Ellis is thrilled they can hold Open Farm Tours this year, albeit with pivoting.

"It's always exciting to see people connect with the farms and learn about the impact that sustainable agriculture has on our food systems and the environment. I think if people can view the Earth as a living organism, that's going to be a huge step forward," says Ellis.

Santa Cruz County's Fruitilicious Farm is participating in Open Farm Tours for the third time. There are guided and self-guided tours for different prices. Kids are free for either option.

“Both versions of the tour offer fig tasting and a farm stand with figs as well as many varieties of apples, pears, quince, watermelons and jams,” says owner Zea Sonnabend, who started the farm in 2012. Visitors can purchase these items at the farm stand. There will also be fruit trees for sale. For guided tours, Sonnabend will lead an approximately 45-minute walk around the farm to discuss different fruit and how they take care of the farm organically.

“I can give people advice on their own fruit trees if they have questions,” adds Sonnabend. “The self-guided tour is for those who want to wander around on their own.”

Fruitilicious aims to produce the most flavorful and nutrient-dense fruit possible utilizing “... true organic methods such as cover cropping, compost, nutrient sprays, and biological pest controls,” shares Sonnabend. “We also believe in maximum biodiversity on our farm, so we have hedgerows and other plantings for beneficial habitat, and we save most of our own seeds and propagate many of our own trees.”

Fruitilicious didn’t participate in the (much smaller) 2020 Open Farm Tours due to the pandemic. Sonnabend relishes the opportunity to return this year.

“We love for people to experience our delicious organic fruit,” Sonnabend says.

San Benito County’s Paicines Ranch is one of two first-time Open Farm Tours participants (the other is Storrs Winery, which is offering guided tours with wine tasting). Sallie Calhoun and Matt Christiano, who have owned Paicines Ranch since 2001, have cattle, sheep, turkeys, pigs and chickens. They produce 100% grass-fed-and-finished lamb and beef, pastured pork and turkey. The property features accommodations for rent and is available for weddings and other events. Paicines offers programs and workshops to educate the community about regenerative agriculture.

“We are currently in the process of expanding guest experiences, including our Soil Kit Experience,” says Mary Rowen, who manages Paicines’ pastured meats and lodging. “We take guests out, and through a series of activities, teach them about water infiltration, soil microbes, and how the work we do here at the ranch helps to build healthy soil. It’s a very engaging experience and people have been excited about getting their hands in the dirt and learning about our underground ecosystem.”

Paicines recently had its first successful vineyard harvest. They use sheep to manage the vineyard “...Through a 25-acre raised trellis system,” explains Rowen. “Our shepherdess Jess calls our flock of rams the ‘ram-scapers’ because they help prune all of the lower vines and perform nutrient cycling throughout the vineyard. We have also had them graze our event lawns between weddings. Paicines Ranch is a dynamic place! We love having visitors here so we can share our story.”

On Oct. 10, the ranch will offer a guided ranch tour and refreshments. “OFT guests will receive a lamb lollipop appetizer prepared by our onsite Executive Chef, Carlos Canada,” says Rowen. “They will enjoy a glass of Eden Rift wine after taking a tour led by Greg Richardson, our director of research and monitoring. People might have an opportunity to see sheep or cattle during their tour; we currently have 2,400 sheep and 24 heifers on the ranch!”

Because the ranch practices rotational grazing through 7,600 acres, animals are not always close to headquarters.

“We hope to make it work,” says Rowen. “Guests love to see our animals. We love for folks to see that our animals are raised in a way that is healthier for them, people, and the planet.”

At the 2021 Open Farm Tours, there is something for everyone. No matter which venue(s) you visit, you will undoubtedly leave with a new appreciation for those that grow our food. These tours are a wonderful opportunity to meet members of the local farming and agricultural communities. At the same time, you can learn how sustainable farming is changing our relationship to food. Or you can just relax and have a glass of wine. Or you can pick some fruit. The choice is yours!

Ellis has also organized a special cannabis farm-related event for those 21 and up the day after Open Farm Tours. At “Regenerative Cannabis Farm Tour & Happy Hour,” 3-6 p.m. Oct. 11, attendees will visit two Watsonville cannabis farms: Bird Valley Organics and Lifted Organics Farms and learn about regenerative agricultural practices.

Following the tour, participants will enjoy appetizers created from farm produce and local ingredients, wine, and seasonal shrubs from Tabitha Stroup. Buy tickets at [eventbrite.com/e/regenerative-cannabis-farm-tour-happy-hour-tickets-172921401567](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/regenerative-cannabis-farm-tour-happy-hour-tickets-172921401567).

Participating Farms, Nursery & Winery in alphabetical order:

Fruitilicious Farm

Luz Del Valle Farm

Live Earth Farm

Paicines Ranch

Storrs Winery

Terra Sole Nursery

Thomas Farm

Whiskey Hill Farm

If You Go:

What: Open Farm Tours.

When: Oct. 9-10, days/hours vary depending on location.

Where: Eight farms and other venues in Santa Cruz and San Benito counties. See map at openfarmtours.com.

Cost: Admission varies depending on venue and activity. Also, products will be available for purchase at selected farms. Pre-register online at openfarmtours.com/tickets.

Pets: No pets are allowed at farms or other venues.

Information: openfarmtours.com
and facebook.com/openfarmtours/.



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