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Country visitors present opportunities and risks

By Curtis Seltzer

I felt the first breath of the coming fall in the early morning. It always heralds weekend farm visitors.

Those who have a second home or land in the country welcome visitors from the city. The ones that turn up at my place are eager for farm work—for an hour or two, sometimes three.

I'm never one to turn down a hand, especially one that doesn't cost an arm and a leg. But I've developed a cautious attitude over these many years toward city visitors who want to something around the farm on a pleasant autumn afternoon. Here are the guidelines that I now try to follow with helpful visitors:

Safety first. Folks who are not familiar with farms, machinery, tools, animals and the idiosyncrasies of your layout and equipment are high-probability candidates for accidents. You, the country landowner, have to anticipate every possible thing that can go wrong, backfire, fall down, spring up and run amok, among others.

I keep visitors out of tricky situations, period—off ladders and roofs, off machinery, off balance beams, out of wells and away from trees that are about to fall. Don't put chainsaws, big power tools, ATVs and orchard ladders in the hands of people who have never used them. Let them learn on someone else.

Visitors will show up without work gloves, steel-toed boots, helmets and long pants.

Don't ask them to do work that requires safety clothing if it's not available...or even when it is.

Health second. Don't put visitors into excessively dusty, dirty or chemically enriched circumstances. Someone will be allergic to something, perhaps more than one something.

Do not put visitors at risk to insect stings, poison ivy and bulls who lack the social graces.

I always provide visitors with work gloves for the simplest tasks, because blisters rise on hands accustomed to keyboards and cell phones. I was once carrying a house beam with a visitor who dropped his end without warning when he announced that he had acquired a splinter.

Keep jobs simple. I once had a mother-in-law who always gave me fiendishly complex Chinese puzzles for Christmas. She had spent her youth in China as the daughter of American missionaries and knew all about these brain-breakers. Her unstated intent, I think, was to show her daughter that I was not bright enough to be her husband. When she visited us one summer as I was building a house, I gave her a carpenter's square, pencil and instructions for laying out a 10-step exterior stair. This is exactly what you should not do with visitors you like...or want to return.

A simple job that I store for visitors is to load split firewood into a truck in the woods and then unload it at the house. No one uses an axe, splitting maul, wedges, sledge, chainsaw, cant hook, tie pick or come-along. I encourage very slow lifting and lots of rest breaks. Still, there are the dangers of dropping a stick on someone's toes or breaking a fingernail.

My daughter had a bunch of her friends out last year, and I assigned them the job of tacking up three rigid (welded) fence panels on locust posts for a new cattle pen. This involved a hammer and U-shaped, barbed staples. I learned that I'd chosen the wrong job for this crew—too many fingers near too many errant hammer blows, too many flying staples, too many blisters (because they didn't wear the gloves I'd provided). Firewood loading was, by contrast, hailed by one and all.

Keep jobs short. Take advantage of your visitors' enthusiasm for doing real work, but don't push it. I've found two or three hours is about right. Tired visitors find accidents. End the job with some reward—food, drink, a swim or a group photo of shared, successful struggle against overwhelming odds.

Don't make the work too hard or too distasteful. Unskilled labor gets menial assignments, but it's not exactly kind to give your guests the job of cleaning out a cattle barn filled to their knees with manure.

Avoid show-off opportunities. There's always somebody who insists on walking the length of an eight-inch-wide roof beam 20 feet off the ground or lifting something that takes two backs, not one. Try to eliminate these temptations before they occur. It's almost impossible to persuade a show-off not to show off once he has it in his head to show off.

No alcohol on the job. Provide lots of cold water and iced liquids instead.

Smart landowners look forward to repeat visits from friends who they can fit into a country "vacation" safely and with good cheer all around.

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