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Autumn treasures: Apples, pumpkins, mazes, mums

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NEW YORK (AP) — Pick-your-own orchards are expected to have a strong fall season, thanks to consumers staying closer to home for leisure activities and an increased interest in local food and lower prices.

"Because of the whole staycation-daycation thing, a lot of our members are saying business has been good," said Kathy McKay, spokeswoman for the North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association. "People are looking for things to do near home instead of getting on a plane."

"We have not heard of any apple U-picks going out of business because of lack of business," agreed Todd Hultquist, spokesman for the U.S. Apple Association, who says the top three states for pick-your-own apples are Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania.



This photo released by the New Hampshire Division of Travel and Tourism shows photos from Oct. 2008 of lit jack-o-lanterns at the annual Keene Pumpkin Festival in Keene, N.H. (AP Photo/New Hampshire Division of Travel and Tourism, Dave Martsolf)

John Slemmer, who lists U-pick farms on a Web site called <http://www.PickYourOwn.org>, estimates that there are about 10,000 such places altogether, including not just apple orchards but farms that grow all types of produce throughout the year.

Slemmer says that for every farm that closes because the land was sold or the owner passed away, he's getting 10 new listings for farms inviting the public in.

"It's growing no matter how you look at it," he said. "People are looking at cheaper sources of food, and without the middleman, you get a better price. With pick-your-own farms, you also remove the labor component. There are health issues, and there's also an entertainment and educational component. People who are so far removed from seeing farms in their daily lives say, 'I want to see where my food comes from.'"

In addition to apple orchards, outings to pumpkin patches are popular in autumn too. Find a place near you at <http://www.pumpkinpatchesandmore.org>.

Or head to Keene, N.H., for the annual Pumpkin Festival, Oct. 17, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. More than 20,000 carved jack-o-lanterns are put on display and lit for this event, which also includes a parade, seed-spitting and pie-eating contests, craft and food vendors, and a nighttime fireworks display. Keene has a population of just

23,000 but typically draws several times that many visitors to town for the event, with people coming from around the country and around the world. Details at <http://www.pumpkinfestival.org/index.html>.

Another big draw for families: Corn mazes. The Corn Maze Directory lists over 600 mazes, with some in every state except Alaska and Hawaii at <http://www.cornmazedir.com/>. Some mazes are so long and complex that they have spotters or corn cops on platforms above the maze to direct lost visitors.

The Liberty Corn Maze near Liberty, Mo., consists of five mazes — including two that are less than a mile and one that's nearly 4 miles long. For the dedicated maze walker, Liberty offers a total of 9.3 miles of corn rows to navigate; details at <http://www.libertycornmaze.com/index.php>.

In Corryton, Tenn., the corn maze at Oakes Farm offers a scavenger hunt in which visitors look for 12 different posts hidden along 4.2 miles of trails; details at <http://www.oakesfarm.com>.

Another way to enjoy the season's colors is by visiting your local botanical garden, where the reds and golds of autumn can be just as spectacular as the pinks and purples of spring.

Several gardens around the country are embracing a tradition imported from Japan that elevates the ordinary chrysanthemum to an object worthy of adulation: Kiku matsuri, or chrysanthemum festivals.

At Bellingrath Gardens in Theodore, Ala., near Mobile, cascading chrysanthemums are cultivated for months before being put on display in November, when they spill from balconies and bridges in stunning 4-foot-long swaths of brilliant reds and yellows.

Bellingrath has been growing cascading mums since 1963, but this year its annual festival will include a special two-day program of Japanese culture. The festival takes place Nov. 1-22, with the Japanese-themed events scheduled for Nov. 6-7, including demonstrations and displays of bonsai, ikebana, origami, brush painting and other arts and traditions.

"It's a really fun way to talk about mums and the culture of Japan," said Bellingrath spokeswoman Jessica Barrick. Details at <http://www.bellingrath.org>.

Other gardens around the country hosting Japanese-themed mum fests include the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, Oct. 17-Nov. 15 — <http://www.nybg.org> — and the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon, Oct. 17-25, <http://www.japanesegarden.com/events/chrysanthemum>.

Annual fall chrysanthemum shows are also scheduled for the Lauritzen Gardens, Omaha's Botanical Center in Nebraska, Oct. 2-Nov. 22, <http://www.omahabotanicalgardens.org/>, and the Botanic Garden of Smith College in Northampton, Mass., Nov. 7-22, <http://www.smith.edu/garden/Conservatory/mum-show.html>.

http://hosted2.ap.org/txdam/4b14e2707da344c79c93ef04d1ae778b/Article_2009-09-14-US-Travel-Trip-Autumn%20Treasures/id-p48678cdbf93e4d84b76fb274fa57d177