

# Spring and early Summer farm activities for the whole family

By Jill L. Ferguson



**S**pring is a fabulous time in Western Pennsylvania. The perennial flowers add color to the ground, birds start chirping in abundance now that winter has come to an end, and signs of new life are everywhere. Nowhere is this truer than on local farms. From March to early June, seeds are sown, seedlings are planted, and baby animals are birthed on farms throughout the tri-state area. And fun events exist for families who want to spend a day or an afternoon in the country, taking in the sights, smells and tastes of farm life.

Two local farms, Bedner's Farm and Greenhouse in MacDonald and Kerber's Dairy in North Huntingdon provide excitement for the whole family. Bedner's offers all ages and skill level outdoor yoga classes, a junior green thumb program for kids ages four through 12, mandala wood cut painting classes and a wealth of other programs in addition to hosting parties, pick-your-own produce events, hayrides and many other fun activities. Kerber's Dairy has sheep and goats for petting, offers all-season tubing, mini-golf, fresh-made ice cream that visitors rave about and they host children's birthday parties.

Other local farms offer tours of their fields, barns and animals; activities geared specifically towards children, such as flower pot painting and do-it-yourself terrarium building; and a chance to see how products are made (milk, cheese, baked goods from scratch). Research by Kingston University in London shows farm visits are important to challenge ignorance and misconceptions about farming (sometimes a child's only concept of farming comes from video games like FarmVille) and farm visits are important to help children understand where their food comes from.

Studies have shown that farms also provide the opportunity for hands-on and multi-sensory learning, which also boosts motor skills. Farms can encourage language development (think toddlers identifying animals, plants and colors and older children learning names of equipment and processes), help children develop or grow their appreciation of nature, promote healthy living (farm to table as opposed to packaged and processed foods to table), enhance problem solving skills and bring scientific concepts to life. And farms are a great place to encourage your child to explore the open spaces and make their own discoveries.

Brittany Bonilla, who grew up in Gibsonia, said her four-year-old daughter Aviana LOVES farms (capitalization theirs). "She is always wanting to kiss the cows," Bonilla said, "just like me." But more seriously, Bonilla said they love to go to farms and discuss how this country was formed and how we all survived off the land, the cycles of life and birth and death.

"We love discussing the purpose of each animal, and how they contribute to the earth, producing food and fertilizer. Farms are so educational," Bonilla said.

The Rodale Institute, located in Eastern Pennsylvania, has designed a Head Start Healthy Start curriculum for children that parents can check out to enhance the farm visit. Available at [rodaleinstitute.org/myfirstgarden/lessons/where-food-comes-from.php](http://rodaleinstitute.org/myfirstgarden/lessons/where-food-comes-from.php). The curriculum walks kids through where food comes from, how seeds grow, planting a garden, harvesting and tasting and visiting a farm. And part of the curriculum has associated activities, books recommendations, crafts, snacks and lessons—all of which are fun and educational. Kids learn how to create snacks using recipes, what mulch is and why it is important and what organic means.

And if you need some recommended books to prepare for your farm visit, Gail Gibbons has authored three best-selling (according to Amazon) children's books on farming: *The Vegetables We Eat*, *The Fruits We Eat* and *From Seed to Plant*. These books, and a visit to the farm will teach children and reinforce the sentiment behind Wendell Berry's words in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, "The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life." ■

Jill L. Ferguson is a writer, artist and entrepreneur originally from Pittsburgh.



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