



Every year AJ Nuckols builds a different giant hay castle to attract visitors to his Virginia farm. As many as 500 round bales are stacked up to 6 tiers high.

Hay Castle Attracts Visitors To Virginia Farm

You've never seen anything like this massive hay castle built by AJ Nuckols at White Fall Farm in Gretna, Va.

The hay playground is part of the farm's agritourism business that includes a pumpkin patch, maze, and other activities.

"It's a whole new art form," Nuckols says about his castles, which are different every year.

"I grew switchgrass for a yield study and had lots of extra bales," Nuckols says, explaining how he started building the castles 8 years ago. "I have an engineering background and have always farmed. I'm really good at stacking hay."

Those skills are useful in stacking as many as 500 bales in up to six tiers. Nuckols uses mostly 4 by 5-ft. round bales, but also incorporates some smaller bales. A 30-in. culvert makes a safe tunnel for kids to crawl through; and he builds hay steps, climbing walls, bridges and slides. Cornstalk thatch on turrets and bamboo elements add a

"Gilligan's Island look."

He also puts up hay tower displays at the farm's entrance with signs that include hours and other information. Visitors come back year after year so each year's castle is different. Nuckols builds one every September and takes it down in November. He feeds bales of good hay to his cattle.

The hay castle is an optional activity in the \$10 admission fee that includes a pumpkin and other extra activities such as a pumpkin hunt. Nuckols notes that he grows sorghum for the maze because it is denser and more drought resistant than corn.

As the season winds down and Nuckols takes down the castle, he says he will be imagining what he can add next year to make it even better.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, White Fall Farm, 6135 Riceville Rd., Gretna, Va. 24557 (ph 434 942-6272; www.whitefallfarm.com; ajnuckols@gmail.com).

3-D Models Made From Cardstock

Jerry Van Gundy turns flat cardstock into 3-D models of farm tractors, excavation equipment, frontier wagons, and even a church complete with pews, altar and other fixtures inside.

"Everything is made from cardstock and string, even the wheels," says Van Gundy. "The hydraulic cylinders and steering all move."

Working from photos and memories, he discovered a talent he never knew he had.

"I always start with the wheels," says Van Gundy. "Then I try to get all the measurements to scale from them. I glue one piece at a time, wait for it to dry and then glue the next piece."

The detail in Van Gundy's work, considering the materials he works with, is impressive. From hydraulic hoses and wiring to the battery under the seat of the John Deere 720, it's easy to see that great care was taken. The 720, like most of his tractors, is about 6 in. wide by 10 in. long.

One of his largest pieces is a 580 B Case backhoe with working outriggers. It is 6 1/2 in. high and 22 in. long when the backhoe is extended.

The church is only 10 in. long and 8 in. high and modeled after one he attended as a boy. When you lift off the roof, the altar at one end has candles and chalices for the sacraments, complete with wafers for communion. There are also pews.



"Everything is made from cardstock and string, even the wheels," says Jerry Van Gundy, who turns flat cardstock into 3-D models.



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An H-shaped, 42-ft. long deck wraps around 18 Cortland apple trees. It lets people in wheelchairs pick apples.

Deck Makes Apple Picking Accessible To All

Since building an apple-picking deck around trees in their orchard, Jim and Laura Leffel hope they will inspire other growers to make orchards more accessible to everyone.

"I never expected it to be as popular as it is," Laura says, crediting Jim for having the idea.

The H-shaped, 42-ft. long by 24-ft. wide green treat deck wraps around 18 Cortland apple trees and is high enough for perfect apple picking for people sitting in wheelchairs. A railing on the open side, a raised box filled with pumpkins on another side, and a 2 by 2 lip around the rest of the deck next to the trees are safety features based on advice from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire student disabilities office.

"We are both ex-military, and we want to do good things for the community," Jim explains.

Open for the first time this fall, the new deck has been busy with individual pickers as well as groups from assisted living, nursing homes, special education classes, and others.

Besides people in wheelchairs, the deck accommodates people with limited mobility who can't access the 2,500 trees in the U-pick orchard. Some people are just happy to pick one apple. Others fill quarter or half-peck bags to purchase.

"There is such a need for outdoor activities. Caregivers are always looking for something to do," Laura says. "It seems everyone has enjoyed coming out."

"We have a sign that says ring the bell if you like picking apples," Jim adds. "The bell is rung all the time."

The visitors in wheelchairs can also shoot apples with a big slingshot at targets and enjoy pie, coffee and cider from the orchard's store.

Next year, the couple plans to grow pumpkins near the deck so that visitors can pick their own pumpkins.

Caring and maintaining the trees around the deck is more challenging, Jim notes, but on a small scale it is manageable. The rewards are worth it.

"We are just really happy to offer this," Laura says. "There seems to be a need."

The Leffels wrapped up their 2017 season in October, but check out their website for event information and open times next year.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Jim and Laura Leffel, Leffel Roots Apple Orchard, W2369 Maple Rd., Eau Claire, Wis. 54701 (ph 715 514-5171; www.leffelroots.com; leffelroots@gmail.com).



"I never expected it to be as popular as it is," says Laura Leffel about the apple-picking deck.