Massachusetts Pick-Your-Own Apple Survey

Wesley R. Autio
Department of Plant, Soil, & Insect Sciences, University of Massachusetts

Orchardists have long recognized that a good awareness of what others are using for orchard practices is an excellent guide for the development of their own practices. This recognition extends to all aspects of the orchard operation, from tree planting to sales. To get a better understanding of how Massachusetts apple growers work with pick-your-own sales, at the December 2011 Massachusetts Fruit Growers' Association Directors Meeting, Alex Dows proposed that we survey Massachusetts apple growers. The Directors enthusiastically supported the idea, and a draft survey was distributed among the Directors in late December and early January. After some modification, the final survey was developed.

To aid in the process of distribution, SurveyMonkey.com was used to house the survey, distribute the survey, and collect the data. This tool allowed us to track responses and to follow up those who had not responded with additional requests. In all, survey requests were distributed to 110 individuals (members of the Massachusetts Fruit Growers' Association and subscribers to the UMass *Healthy Fruit* newsletter). Of those distributed, 83 responses (75%) were received (Table 1). Within the responses, 1798 acres of apple production were represented (about 42% of the Massachusetts total, Table 1).

Table 1. Pick-your-own survey distribution and response rate.

Surveys distributed (no. of orchards)	Survey responses (no. of orchards)	Survey responses (% of orchards)
110	83	75%
Massachusetts total acreage	**Survey responses (acres)**	**Survey responses (% of Mass. acreage)**
4287	1798	42%

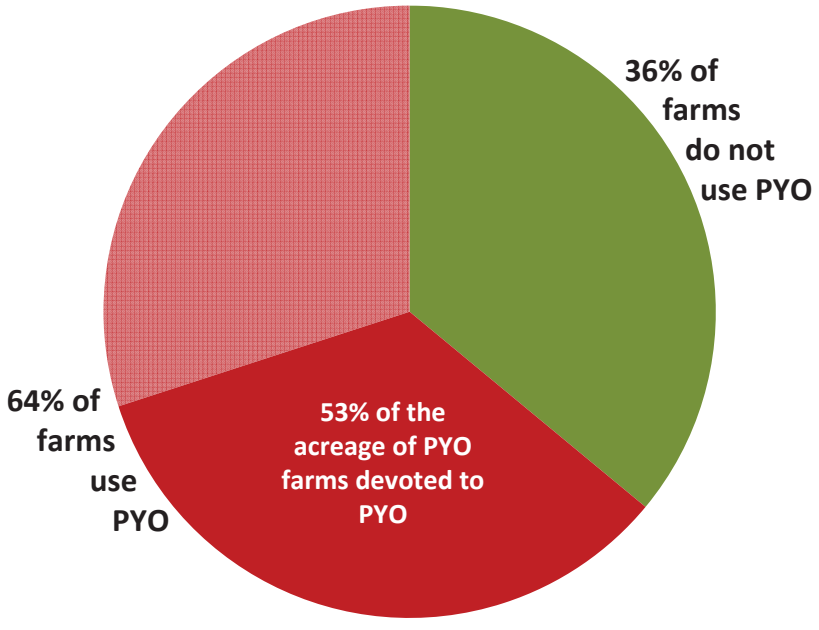


Figure 1. The extent of pick-your-own apple sales in Massachusetts, and the portion of farms devoted to pick-your-own trees.

Among responses, the average farm had 28 acres of apples. Sixty-four percent of farms used pick-your-own (PYO) sales, and on average more than half of the acreage of those farms was devoted to PYO (Figure 1).

About 30% of the PYO acreage is in dwarf trees, 53% in semi-dwarf, and 17% in standards (Figure 2). Most farms provide access

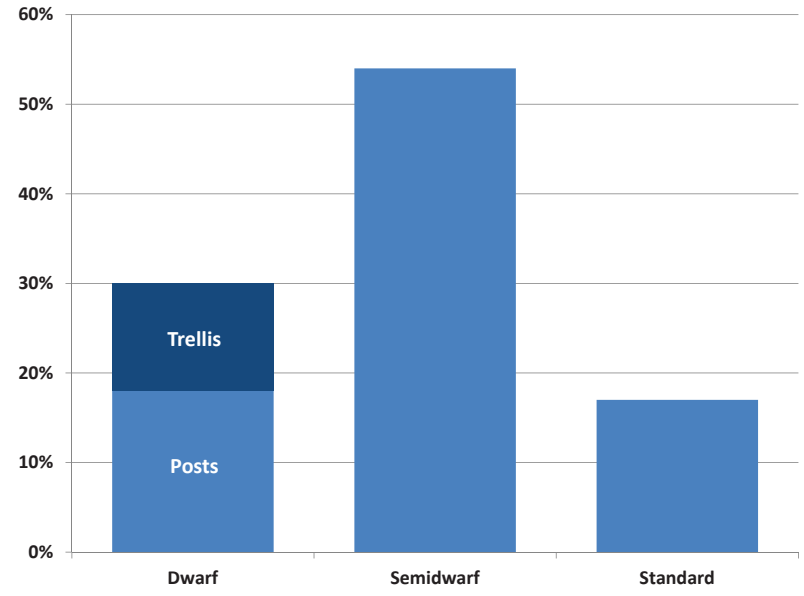


Figure 2. Percentage of Massachusetts PYO acreage using dwarf, semidwarf, or standard sized trees.

for handicapped people, and only 17% provide some form of access aid, such as ladders (Figure 3).

School tours are provided by 80% of PYO farms (Figure 4). On average, farms charge $5.17 per child for school tours. Many farms utilize other forms of entertainment to supplement PYO visits (Figure 4). Hayrides are made available to customers at 66% of PYO farms. Animals are an atrachtion at 36%. Live music is used at more than 20% of farms, and various types of mazes are part of the entertainment at just under 10%. Several other forms of entertainment are used, including walking trails, cider pressing, pony rides, rock climbing walls, kids games, BBQs, snack bars, farm stores, picnic areas, and speed dating.

Advertising is a critical part of nearly all PYO orchards (Figure 5). Everyone uses word-of-mouth advertising. Seventy-five percent use newspaper, 50% use email lists, 25% use radio ads, 15% use direct mailings, and 11% use television ads. Sixty-five percent of farms use other forms of advertising, such as the internet (43% use web-based tools), road signs, PYO guides, flyers, and brochures. Among the various techniques, the greatest portion of the advertising dollar (50%) is spent on newspaper ads (Figure 6). About 30% is spent on email lists, radio, direct mailings,

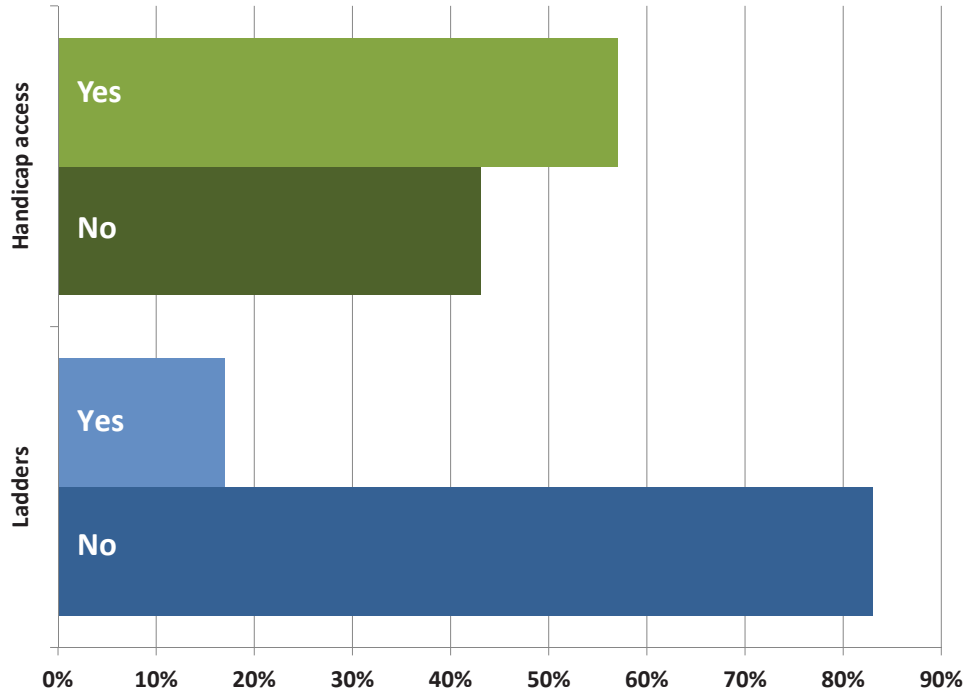


Figure 3. Percent of Massachusetts PYO orchards providing handicapped access and ladders.

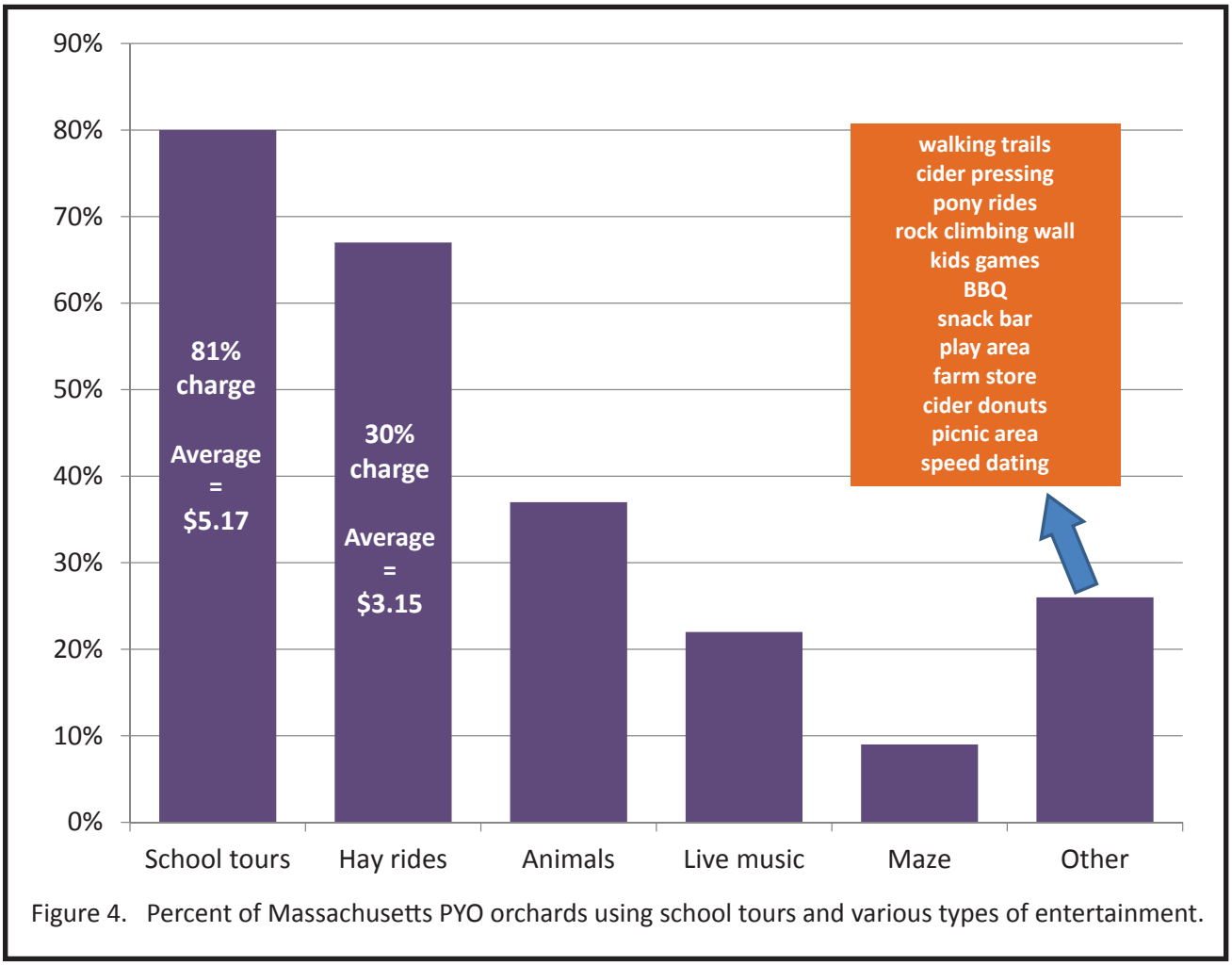
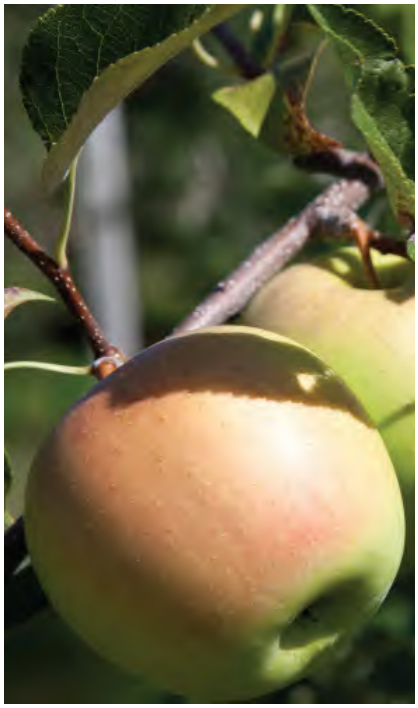


Figure 4. Percent of Massachusetts PYO orchards using school tours and various types of entertainment.



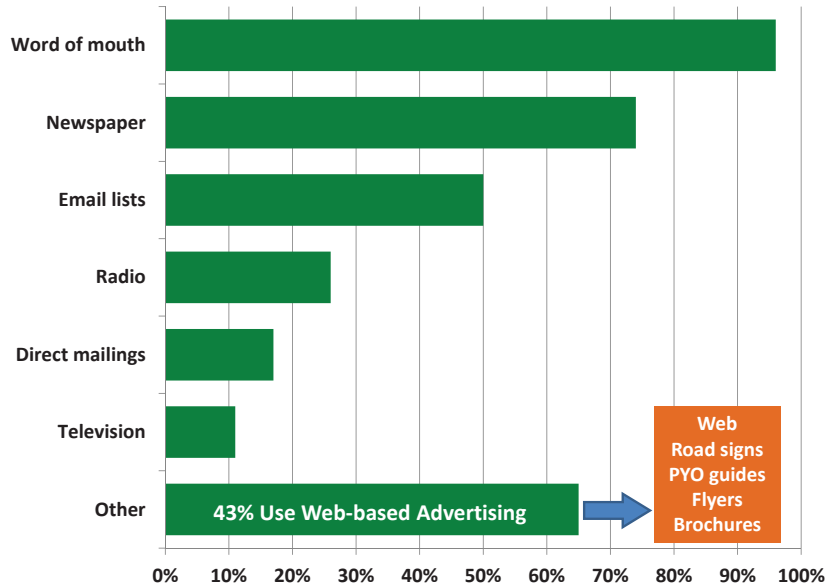


Figure 5. Percent of Massachusetts pick-your-own orchards using various advertising approaches.

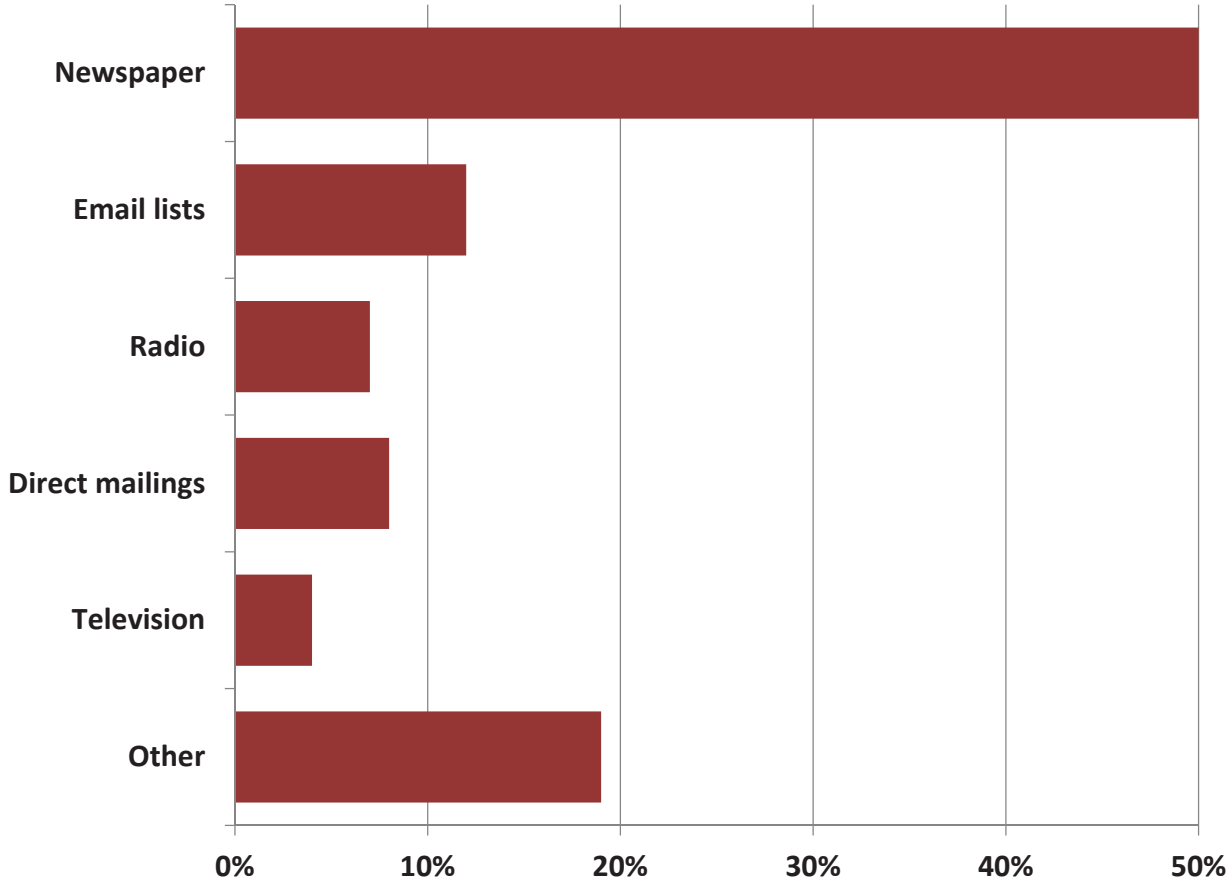


Figure 6. Percent of Massachusetts PYO orchard advertising expenses on various approaches.

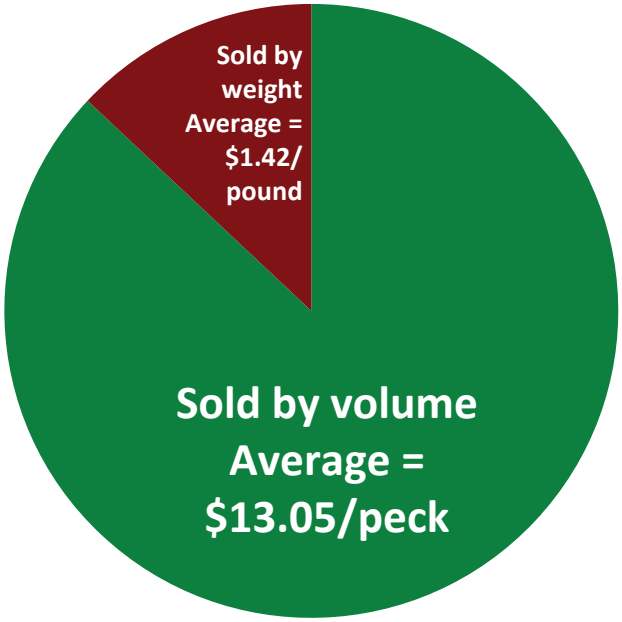


Figure 7. Fruit sales in Massachusetts PYO orchard by volume versus by the pound.

and television together.

Among PYO orchards, 87% sell fruit by the container, with an average charge of $13.05 per peck. Of the small number selling by the pound, the average charge is $1.42 per pound. Entry fees are charged by fewer than 10% of all PYO orchards, and 68% charge the customer for fruit prior to picking.

The survey included three very open-ended questions. The first asked farmers to list pros and cons associated with the PYO aspects of their farm (Table 2). The pros were all as you might expect, and included "happy customers," "great attraction," "less physical labor," etc. The cons also were as you might expect, and include the problems associated with crowds, theft, parking, and the weather.

A second open-ended question asked farmers what changes they were anticipating in the near future (Table 3). PYO orchards are considering more parking, more varieties, added entertainment, and better orchard management. One noted that their future plans primarily include retirement!

The third open question asked farmers to list their most serious concerns for the future of their PYO operation (Table 3). The three most serious concerns were regulation, food safety, and this survey encouraging

Table 2. Pros and cons (from the farmer's perspective) associated with pick-your-own sales as listed by Massachusetts PYO Survey respondents in 2011.

Pros	Cons
Beautiful views	Crowds
Easy access	Waste
Family friendly	The public
Entertainment	Theft
Repeat customers	Weather dependent
More time for sales	Vandalism
Freedom of choice	Risk
Just a "real orchard"	Parking
Happy customers	
Attracts customers	
Keeps farm viable	
Dog friendly	
Good return	
Less physical labor	
Great exposure	
Extends season	
Immediate cash flow	

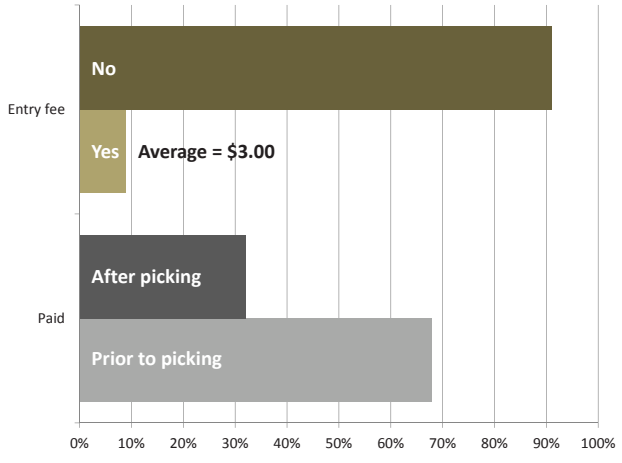


Figure 8. Extent of entry fee usage and the timing of payment in Massachusetts PYO orchards.

Table 3. Planned changes and concerns (from the farmer's perspective) associated with pick-your-own sales as listed by Massachusetts PYO Survey respondents in 2011.

Changes	Concerns
Better crowd control	Regulation
More parking	Food safety
Improvement of animal area	This survey
Enhanced handicap access	
New varieties	
Donut machine	
Increase price	
More dwarf trees	
One-price bags	
Improved stand	
Better signage	
Loyalty discounts	
Email lists	
Hay rides	
U-sort apples	
Expand plantings available	
More value-added products	
Better orchard management	
Retirement	

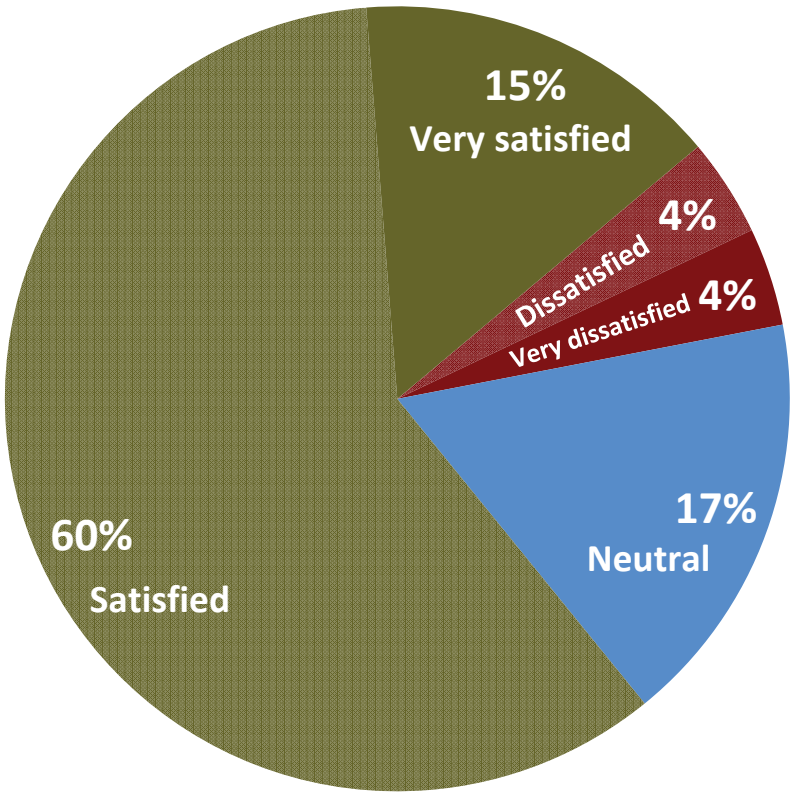
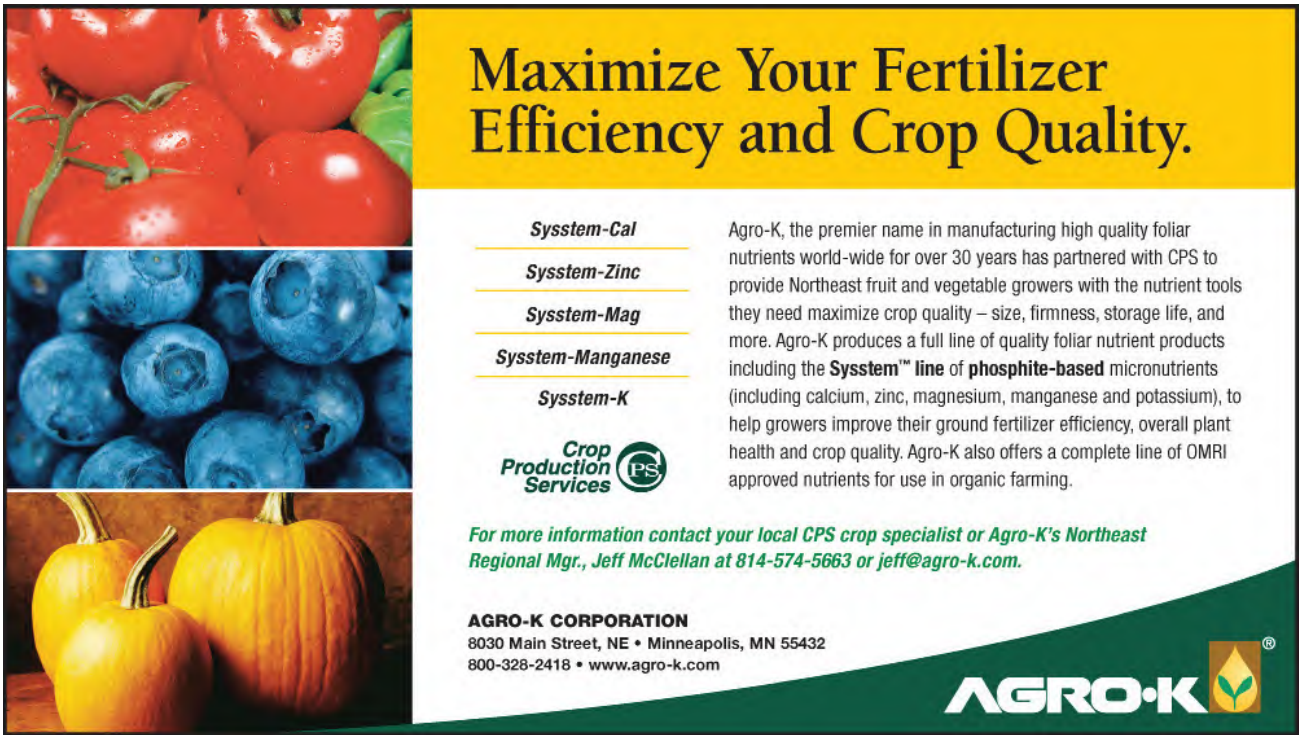


Figure 9. Levels of satisfaction with PYO sales among Massachusetts PYO orchards.

more competition.

The last question on the survey asks growers to rate their level of satisfaction with PYO on their farm (Figure 9). Overwhelmingly, orchards were satisfied or very satisfied with PYO. Seventeen percent were neutral, and 8% were dissatisfied with PYO.

We hope that this survey helps guide the future develop of PYO as an apple sales technique.