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BY
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BUCOLIC BIRTHDAY BASH

A birthday party on your farm can be fun, entertaining and unique with one of these themed bashes.

Life on a farm is always exciting but perhaps never so much as when there's something to celebrate. When your child's birthday rolls around, there's no need to rent out a skating rink or an indoor playground for a party. Just take a look around your farm: You've got the makings for a one-of-a-kind, back-to-nature birthday party on your property.

According to Kim Byers, founder and creative director of The Celebration Shoppe, an online party-supply retailer, farm-themed events are some of the most popular with her customers. Here are ideas for four themed birthday parties to host on your farm at various times of the year. Each is sure to give your birthday boy or girl and his or her friends a fabulous opportunity to explore the great outdoors and make some one-of-a-kind memories.

Watermelon Festival

In late summer, farm towns across the country host watermelon festivals to celebrate the long days of summer and the sweet, juicy melons that signify the season. If you grow watermelons, host this party when your crop is at its height; if not,





TED FOX/ALAMY



BON APPETIT/ALAMY

Clockwise: A watermelon festival isn't complete without a melon-eating contest.

Carry your corn-crazy party theme over to dinner by serving ears of corn grilled in their husks.

Use a watermelon as food and decoration by hollowing it out and using the rinds to serve fruit or punch.



STEPHANIE STADON

purchase a truckload from a local grower who has too many melons on his hands. Your guests will love recreating their own version of this small-town agricultural tradition.

DECORATE Pull out your jack-o'-lantern carving tools and use them to carve a watermelon instead. After cleaning out the insides (and reserving them to eat later), use a sharp knife to carve faces, shapes or messages, such as "Happy Birthday," into several melons. They'll make perfect table decorations for your watermelon party.

PLAY No watermelon festival is complete without watermelon-eating and seed-spitting contests. Place several stacks of watermelon slices along a table and position one child behind each stack. Instruct each child to start eating at the word "go." Use a stopwatch to keep time; the child who has eaten the most slices before the time is up wins. For seed spitting, use duct tape to mark a line for the spitters to stand on. Place markers in the ground that denote 1 foot, 2 feet and so on. Let the kids take turns spitting watermelon seeds and checking to see how far their seeds went. The child whose seeds go the farthest is the winner.

EAT You can decorate a cake to look like a watermelon with green and red frosting, complete with chocolate chips for seeds, but the watermelon-themed foods don't stop there. Slice a watermelon in half, lengthwise. Scoop the fruit out and reserve it, leaving the rind intact. You should end up with two watermelon bowls, each in an oval shape. Fill one bowl with lemonade or fruit juice, mix with any juice left standing in the rind, and place in the freezer for three or more hours. At the party, serve scoops of this frozen concoction straight from the watermelon rind into cups. Your guests will love the watermelon "slush."

Chop the hulled watermelon into bite-sized pieces and place it in the second watermelon bowl to serve. Add cut cantaloupe, grapes, strawberries and other fruits to make a fruit salad. Cover and chill until ready to serve.

For another watermelon treat, dry watermelon seeds in the sun. Or to oven-dry, spread one layer of the seeds on a baking sheet and lightly salt them. Bake at 350 degrees F, turning occasionally, until crunchy (about 10 minutes). Serve as an appetizer or a crunchy, salty treat at the party.

As a main dish, layer slices of watermelon inside toasted cheese sandwiches for a fruity twist on a comfort-food favorite.

Corn Crazy

More than 92 billion acres of corn are grown in the United States each year, and almost every food you can purchase includes some ingredients derived from corn. If you're a fan of fresh, homegrown corn and have some on your property, why not celebrate with a party focused on this popular American crop?

DECORATE Look no further than the cornfield for your decoration ideas. Arrange colorful Indian corn on the tables for centerpieces, and hang or prop dried corn stalks along the edges of tables or barns to create the feeling that your partygoers are in the middle of a cornfield. Don't forget to hang a scarecrow or two on posts in your party space for added authenticity.



PAULETTE JOHNSON

Line a truck bed or trailer with bales of hay and take guests on a hayride around your property

PLAY Scarecrows are designed to protect cornfields from the crows that love to peck on growing cobs. Help your guests create their own miniature scarecrows: Give each child a long, white sock with a Styrofoam ball buried in the toe. Help each child pull the sock over the top of a 1-liter bottle so that the ball rests on top of the bottle, creating the head of the scarecrow. Help each child glue the opening of the sock to the bottom of the bottle. Provide burlap fabric for children to dress their scarecrows, along with googly eyes or buttons, plenty of straw, bandanas, permanent markers or paint pens,

and bits of brightly covered fabric to decorate scarecrows' heads.

EAT There are many fun ways to incorporate corn into your party food. Popcorn is always a favorite with kids, and you can serve it traditionally or rolled into popcorn balls with a little butter and caramel. Also try grilling ears of corn still in the husk. Children will love peeling back the husks and taking a bite of fresh-from-the-farm corn hot off the grill.

Harvest Hoedown

When summer fades into fall and fruits and vegetables are ready to be harvested, the bounty is surely something to celebrate. Combine the excitement of the harvest season with a late-summer or early fall birthday, giving kids plenty of fun memories of their day at your farm.

DECORATE Let the birthday boy or girl help you collect colored fall leaves from across your property and arrange them on the center of each table in a circle. Inside the circle, place small colorful gourds or pumpkins; these can double as party favors for guests.

PLAY For young guests, line up square bales of hay to create a large rectangle or square, about 12 by 12 feet, with one opening for an entrance and another for an exit. Inside the square, use bales to create a maze. The secret is to have different pathways that are blocked along the way, except for the one that leads from the entrance to the exit. Kids will want to roam through the hay maze again and again.

Use more hay bales to line the sides of a trailer or the bed of a pickup truck to take party guests on a hayride around your property. If you have a tractor to pull the trailer, kids will love it all the more.

MAKE A MINI SCARECROW



1

STEP 1:

Help the partygoers assemble their scarecrows by stuffing socks with a Styrofoam ball and 1-liter bottle, which will form the head and body.



2

STEP 2:

Provide materials for children to dress and decorate their scarecrows; be sure to supervise and help younger kids with cutting and gluing.



3

STEP 3:

Let the miniature scarecrows your guests design add to the ambience of the party. When they're not being toted around by their owners, prop them on tables as homemade decorations.

STEPHANIE STATION (3)



JOHN KELLY/ALAMY

Homemade caramel apples will be a hit with partygoers.

For the older youth attending the party, consider lighting a bonfire when the sun starts to sink into the horizon. It will provide warmth on a cooler night, as well as entertainment. Provide newspapers for everyone to sit on, tell a few ghost stories, and sing campfire songs.

EAT At a harvest party, food is part of the fun. Fill a giant tub with water and apples, and let kids try their hands at bobbing for apples the old-fashioned way. If you're building a bonfire, offer marshmallows for roasting and graham crackers and chocolate bars to make s'mores.

Other kid-friendly foods that are perfect for a harvest festival include sliced apples, pumpkin muffins, apple cider or juice, and salads of sliced fruit and nuts. For dessert, decorate cupcakes with candy corn or offer homemade caramel apples.



STEPHANIE STATON

Provide jars for capturing insects and imaginations.

Creepy, Crawly Cluster

They may be pests in your garden, but insects can be the centerpiece of a celebration kids will love. Rather than shooing the bugs away from your birthday event, invite them in and celebrate the creepy-crawly goodness of an outdoor party. However, while your guests may enjoy finding and looking at bugs, they won't want to leave with stings or itchy spots, so be sure to provide bug spray for everyone.

DECORATE Create a bug-themed party space by draping Halloween spider webs across tables or walls, complete with plastic spiders. Hang colorful paper lanterns to represent bug lanterns, and scatter plastic bugs across the tables like confetti.

PLAY Stage a caterpillar race: Line partygoers up into two lines, and give an old sleeping bag to the person at the front of each line. Similar to a potato-sack race, the first runner must get inside the sleeping bag, zipping it up to their shoulders, and race to a marked finish point, then run (still inside the sleeping bag) back to his or her line. Then the next runner takes a turn. The team whose last runner completes the race first, without any runners coming out of the sleeping bag, is the winning team.

Collect bugs: Before the party, gather enough Mason jars for each child to have one of his or her own, and poke several holes in each jar's lid. You might even use a paint pen to personalize each jar (i.e., "Jacob's Bugs"). Before guests arrive, gather ladybugs or other insects to be released just before your bug hunt. (If you don't want to hunt down bugs on your own property, you can order ladybugs in large quantities from natural pest-control websites such as www.arbico-organics.com.) At the party, release the bugs in a designated area, pass out the bug jars, and send the kids on a bug hunt. They'll be thrilled to see how many they can find. (Just be sure to request that they release the bugs when they get home.)

EAT Start the meal with caterpillar sub sandwiches, using sliced olives for eyes and carrot sticks for feet, suggests Greg Jenkins, a professional event and party planner with Long Beach, Calif.-based Bravo Productions. Other creepy-crawly foods include ants on a log (celery sticks

Young at Heart

Children aren't the only ones having birthdays; why not host a farm-style party for your spouse, parent or friend? Any of the themes discussed here could also translate well into an adult birthday party with a few minor tweaks. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when hosting an adult party on your farm:

MAKE FOOD THE CENTERPIECE. As a rule, grown-ups care more about the food and drink, while kids care more about the games and entertainment. So consider serving foods fresh from your garden: Fresh, grilled vegetables are always a hit, along with fresh berries or fruit to accompany dessert.

PROVIDE SEATING FOR EVERYONE. While most children don't mind sitting on the ground, you'll need actual seats for adults. If finding enough chairs to go around is a challenge, gather some rectangular hay bales and cover them with colorful picnic blankets and cushions to make seating, suggests Isabel Smith of Isabel Smith Wedding Design, who has planned a number of farm-based weddings and events.

CONSIDER THE TEMPERATURE. "Even in the height of summer, it can get chilly in the evening," Smith says. "So I always recommend [renting] fire pits or chimeneas to keep guests warm later in the day."



filled with peanut butter, dotted with raisins on top) and fly-in-the-batter pudding (vanilla pudding with raisins stirred in). For drinks, mix lemonade and blue Kool-Aid to make green bug juice.

To make a dirt cake—the perfect birthday cake for a bug party—start by baking a pan of brownies. When cooled, tear the brownies into small pieces and pile them into a round casserole pan or trifle dish. Scatter a few gummy worms on top and cover the brownies with a layer of whipped cream or chocolate pudding. Add a few more gummy worms and cover with a layer of chopped Oreo cookies. Top with a few more gummy worms. When you spoon out servings, each child should get a worm or two along with their “dirt.” ★

Nancy Mann Jackson is a freelance writer based in Huntsville, Ala. She writes regularly about food and farming.

WEB LINK

Keep the memories of your barnyard bash alive by creating a post-party scrapbook. Get started with the tips at www.hobbyfarmhome.com/scrapbooking.

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