

Considerations for Operating a Pick-Your-Own Operation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Foreword

A Pick-Your-Own Twilight Q&A session was held on April 16, 2020 inviting pick-your-own operators to join a web conference to ask questions and share ideas to help protect the health of customers and employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. UT Extension specialists from the Department of Plant Sciences, Department of Food Science, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Center for Profitable Agriculture along with representatives of the Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) were available to field questions, identify resources and offer possible solutions. A total of 32 producers, Extension specialists and TDA representatives participated in the session. This fact sheet discusses many of the questions posed during the session, suggestions for procedures for producers to consider and additional resources.

Disclaimers

Information presented is for educational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. Any specific products or services referenced are for informational purposes only and do not indicate an endorsement.

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1) Should we allow pick-your-own this year or only pre-picked product with drive-through pick-up?

Offering pre-picked produce with pre-payment options and “curbside” pick-up will help minimize contact with people and potential exposure. This may not be possible for all producers because of labor availability or other issues. Pre-picking produce and delivering it to customers’ vehicles will help to minimize exposure and contact with people.

2) What are some recommendations for pick-your-own procedures?

It may be helpful to try to schedule appointments for people to pick at a certain time in order to limit the number of people at your operation and in the field at the same time. If you are not able to schedule picking times or have people who come to the farm to pick without an appointment, consider asking them to wait in their vehicles until a place in the field opens up. One option for communicating when an opening is available in the field would be to develop a texting wait list, where customers text a farm cell phone number upon arrival, and then a farm employee texts them when a picking area has opened up. Make pre-picked product available for people who are unable to schedule an appointment or wait for a spot in the field.

There are several online tools typically used for scheduling appointments, booking events or issuing tickets that may be useful for scheduling picking appointments. Examples may include:

- <https://www.eventbrite.com>
- <https://www.bookeo.com>
- <https://www.ticketspice.com>
- <https://signup.com>
- <https://www.setmore.com/>
- <https://www.appointlet.com/>
- <https://www.picktime.com/>
- <https://www.sagenda.com/>
- <https://tableagent.com/reservation-system/>
- <https://www.fresha.com/pricing>

New picking containers provided by the farm to customers should be used for picking. Consider charging by the container rather than by weight. To limit the number of interactions, producers could have customers check-in to pick up containers and pay for product before going to the field.

Customers should wash their hands before and after picking, then depart for home without lingering. Customers should also wash their hands any other time their hands may have become contaminated while on your farm, such as after using the restroom or after blowing their nose, coughing or sneezing. Customers should not eat produce being picked or any other food while they are in the field.

Customers should be instructed to bring masks to wear while picking at your farm. It is important to communicate this in advance, at the time they schedule their appointment, if using a scheduling app, or through your farm website, voicemail message, social media and on-farm signage. Farm employees should also wear masks to model this behavior and for their own health and safety.

As the COVID-19 virus is mainly spread through the air, gloves are not recommended for customers to wear while picking, but they are free to bring their own, if it gives them peace of mind. Hands must still be washed properly prior to putting on and taking off gloves. For more information on glove use, see questions 11 and 12 below.

Producers should implement strategies to maintain social distancing in the field. Encourage one-way traffic down the row, use color-coded signage to make it easy for customers to find where you want them to pick and/or divide your field into blocks (Fig. 1). It would be worthwhile to ensure customers have plenty of produce where you are directing them to pick, so they do not have incentives to move to other rows. You may also want to have an employee mark where customers start and stop in a row, so that the next customer can start where another customer left off, or employees can pick any remaining product.

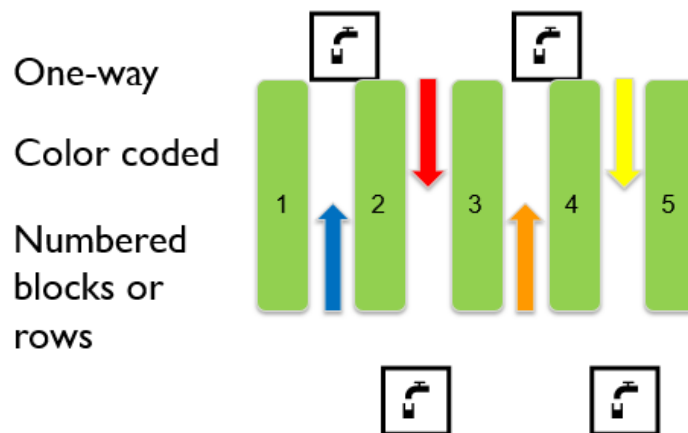


Figure 1. Customer traffic in the field. Be sure to have handwashing stations nearby the field.

3) What are some recommendations for curbside pick-up?

If you are offering pre-picked produce with curbside or drive-through pick-up, have one person handling the product and another person handling the payment transaction to avoid cross contamination. Customers should be asked to pop their trunks if possible. The person handling the produce should not touch the vehicle. Either have another employee available to open and close the trunks or car doors or have the person handling payment do so. Both employees should wear gloves and masks to protect customers and yourselves. Although the virus is not thought to be transferred via fruits and vegetables, packing fruit and other produce in clamshells will demonstrate to customers your dedication to hygiene and customer safety. It will also be helpful to have the minimum number of employees handling the produce, so pick in the saleable container and directly into the flat or box whenever possible. You could consider reserving some pre-picked produce and a special, early pick-up time for people who are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 to reduce the risk for this population even further.

4) How should payment be handled this year?

Online, pre-payment of product for pick-up or contactless transactions such as online payment or money transfer (e.g., Pay Pal or Venmo) are preferable to minimize risk of transmission to customers and staff. If payment is required on-farm, some methods to implement social distancing and reduce risk include:

- Installing a plexiglass or plastic barrier between the cashier and customer.
- Adding a table in front of the regular check-out counter so cashiers and customers cannot get close together.
- Marking 6-foot distances where customers would tend to line up for check-out with tape or paint on the floor or ground. Rope could be strung on poles at waist height where people should line up along with 6-foot increments marked.
- Asking customers to swipe their own cards on processing machines so employees will not have to handle cards.
- Raising limits on credit/debit card processors to avoid having customer signatures for cards.
- Asking employees to wear gloves when handling payment with cards or cash.
- Sanitizing between transactions.

In addition, if accepting cash,

- Request customers to pay with exact change whenever possible.
- Ask customers to deposit cash directly into a specific “cash-in” container. Consider putting this cash aside before handing for five days, or handle assuming it is contaminated with COVID-19 and take precautions.
- Provide change from cash that has been out of circulation for five days.

The Center for Rural Enterprise Engagement provides some additional considerations for touchless transactions at <https://ruralengagement.org/2020/04/22/touchless-transactions-e-commerce-guidance-for-rural-business-managers-considering-online-sales/>.

5) Should children still be allowed to pick?

Pick-your-own, like many things such as grocery shopping, needs to be different this year. The number of people allowed in the field at any one time will need to be limited. People picking will need to be

more diligent and follow specific instructions for handwashing, picking in a specific location, wearing masks, etc., and get in and out as quickly as possible without lingering. Therefore, it is not advisable to allow children to pick this year.

6) Should we let anyone in our market? If so, what precautions do we need to take?

If your market is small and closed-in, it may be advisable to create a location outside, perhaps under a tent, where customers can collect picking containers and pay for produce. If your market is larger, you may be able to accommodate customers safely inside. In either case, you will need to clean and disinfect high touch surfaces frequently. If possible, leave the market door open to prevent people from having to touch the door handle. If your market is also a permitted food manufacturing facility, retail food store or food service facility, check with your inspector to determine if leaving the market door open is permissible.

You want to make sure that you have a well thought out plan in place to maintain social distancing in your market and your field at all times. Developing a written plan will help you communicate it with staff members and implement it more effectively.

Determine how many people you can accommodate in your store and/or field, while maintaining 6-foot spacing and only allow that many people in at once. Have a plan in place of how you will manage lines and overflow of customers. This is where pre-picked produce and curbside pick-up can be helpful.

7) Should we let anyone use the restrooms?

Restrooms or port-a-johns should be made available to customers. Handwashing facilities should be conveniently available, and signage should remind customers to thoroughly wash their hands. Create and follow a standard operating procedure for how and how often the restrooms and handwashing facilities will be cleaned and restocked. This will vary depending on the volume of customers that come through your farm.

8) What do we do if we do not have any handwashing facilities on our farm?

Handwashing facilities are a necessity as handwashing is one of the best defenses against the spread of COVID-19. There are many options for handwashing facilities, if you currently do not have handwashing stations available. A sufficient number of handwashing stations should be made available to allow for customers to wash their hands before and after picking and after using restrooms.

1. Build your own handwashing stations. Two resources that may be helpful in building handwashing stations are:
 - <https://ncfreshproducesafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Hand-washing-unit-handout.pdf?fwd=no>
 - <https://extension.umn.edu/growing-safe-food/farm-handwashing>
2. Purchase handwashing stations. Portable tables with sinks that can be hooked to hoses and tanks for gray water can be purchased online or from big box stores for under \$100. Other portable handwashing stations are available for purchase for upwards of \$1,000.

3. Rent handwashing stations. In this case, the service company will also restock with soap, water and towels. Rentable handwashing stations are in great demand, so make reservations as soon as possible.



Figure 2. Examples of handwashing station components.

Whatever option(s) you choose, make sure that you still follow social distancing recommendations between sinks and locations where customers may line up to wash their hands. Develop a schedule to regularly check, clean and restock the handwashing stations so that customers never run out of supplies (water, soap, single-use towels) and empty trash. Provide single-use towels for drying of hands and a trash can with liner for disposal.

Though handwashing is of critical importance this year, it is important each and every year as it is also one of the best defenses against preventing foodborne illnesses. The Tennessee Agricultural Enhancement Program, administered by the TDA, provides cost-share opportunities that expand or improve your farming operation, and permanent handwashing stations are eligible expenses under this program. For more information, please visit:

<https://www.tn.gov/agriculture/farms/taep/producer/producer-diversification.html>.

9) What kind of soap should we use for handwashing?

Regular liquid soap can be used for handwashing. It is important to have signs that clearly explain how to properly wash your hands such as:

- <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/documents/HandWashingPoster.pdf>
- <http://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/childrens-health/school-health/documents/handwash-poster-english.pdf>

NOTE: On both of these signs, they show turning off the faucet with the paper towel, once your hands are cleaned and dried. This is important as to not recontaminate your hands.

When in doubt, wash your hands!

Employees should wash hands at a minimum:

- Before starting work
- Before putting on gloves
- After using the toilet
- Upon returning to work after breaks
- Before and after eating
- After removing gloves
- After smoking
- After touching animals

- After touching face, blowing nose, coughing or sneezing
- When changing tasks
- After handling payment
- After opening car doors and/or opening or closing trunks

Customers should wash their hands at a minimum:

- Upon arrival at the farm
- Before picking
- After using the toilet
- After touching face, blowing nose, coughing or sneezing
- After picking before leaving the farm

10) What disinfectant solution should we use to clean for COVID-19?

Regular household bleach is an effective disinfectant and readily available. With the use of any sanitizer or disinfectant, it is important to always clean the surface first, as you cannot sanitize or disinfect a dirty surface.

Cleaning involves four steps:

- 1) Remove dirt or debris from the surface.
- 2) Apply detergent and scrub the surface.
- 3) Rinse the dirt and detergent from the surface.
- 4) Sanitize or disinfect. NOTE: Some sanitizers and disinfectants have a rinsing step, so be sure to follow the label of the sanitizer or disinfectant that you choose.

Sanitizers are used for surfaces that touch produce directly, also called food contact surfaces. Sanitizers are generally used at a lower concentration and need to be in contact with the surface for a shorter amount of time (contact time) than disinfectants. Disinfectants are used for non-food contact surfaces and high touch surfaces (i.e., doorknobs, handrails, payment counters, faucets, restroom surfaces, etc.), at a higher concentration and for a longer amount of time. For example, the CDC recommends 1,000 ppm (5 tablespoons in a gallon of water, or 4 teaspoons in a quart of water) bleach to disinfect non-food contact surfaces, with a contact time of at least one minute. Note that this is regular bleach (5.25%), and you want to mix up only the amount you can use in a day or put the bleach in a bottle (non-clear) that will not come in contact with UV rays, as bleach is light sensitive. Also, make sure that the bottle of bleach is not expired and has been open for no longer than 30 days. Temperature extremes can also make the active ingredient in bleach break down faster, so be sure to store at room temperature. There are many other disinfectants besides bleach, but make sure to always follow the label, and never mix disinfectants. The EPA provides a list of disinfectants that are effective against COVID-19 at <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>.

11) Do customers need to bring masks and gloves?

Customers should be advised to bring and wear their own masks, as recommended by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Directions for making masks can be found readily online, including sew and no sew options. Some examples are available at

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>
- https://foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Bandanas-as-Face-Coverings_COVID-19_Flyer.pdf?fwd=no

If customers arrive without masks, consider offering them pre-picked produce to purchase or invite them to return another time to pick with a mask. It could be a liability risk to provide or sell masks to customers.

Gloves are not recommended for customers who are picking produce. Customers should wash their hands before picking produce and only touch product they intend to pick and purchase. Consumers should not sample produce or eat other foods in the field.

12) Do you recommend that farm workers wear masks or gloves?

First and foremost, it is important for everyone working at the farm to understand the symptoms of COVID-19. Any employee who is sick or who has come into contact with someone who has been sick should stay home. Owners/operators should monitor employee health to watch for symptoms, which could include taking employee's temperatures upon arrival at work each day.

Farmworkers should wear masks in order to help protect themselves, other employees and customers as well as to provide a good example to your customers. Masks may help keep people who are unknowingly infected with COVID-19 from passing on the virus to others.

Disposable gloves may be beneficial for workers conducting tasks such as handling money or payment transactions, delivering product to customer vehicles, cleaning and disinfecting, and other tasks where they may come in contact with high touch surfaces. When gloves are used, they must be used properly!

Proper glove use includes:

- 1) Washing hands before putting gloves on, immediately after removing gloves and whenever you change into a new pair.
- 2) Changing them whenever they get dirty, in between different tasks (i.e., between handling money and handling product), if they rip or tear, and every 4 hours if worn continuously.
- 3) Properly removing gloves. Be sure to peel the gloves off inside out so that your clean hand never comes in contact with the outside of the glove, which could be contaminated.
- 4) Using disposable gloves only once! Do not put a used pair of gloves back on!

Note: Be aware that some people have latex glove allergies, so nitrile, vinyl or polyethylene gloves may be a better option.

13) Do we need to remove the furniture that is currently on the farm market porch?

While generally with pick-your-own you are also selling the farm experience and producers encourage customers to enjoy all the farm has to offer, this year is different. You do not want to have any places where people will want to linger or congregate, including seating at the farm market, picnic benches, play areas, etc.

14) What are farmers charging for a gallon of strawberries this year?

A sample of prices from pick-your-own operations in middle Tennessee in 2019 indicates that as expected, there is a slight variation on prices. In 2019, pick-your-own strawberry prices in middle Tennessee were between \$2 and \$3.75 per pound. Pre-picked prices were \$4.25 per pound, \$4 per quart or \$15 per gallon. These prices are consistent with what some operations in surrounding states

charged for pick-your-own and pre-picked strawberries in 2019, such as North Carolina. Another reference you could consider when evaluating your price structure is that the 2019 strawberry prices at Tennessee farmers markets were between \$3 and \$6 per quart or \$13 per gallon depending on the location. These prices are an indicator of consumers' willingness to pay for local strawberries. Always keep in mind that there could be a variation in what customers are willing to pay based on your location. Also keep in mind that pricing by the container rather than by weight may help limit interaction between customers and your employees.

During the Q&A session, farmer participants provided the following comments regarding their planned pricing for the strawberry season:

1. We have been charging \$12 per gallon for you-pick and \$15 gallon for already picked. We are considering \$16 per gallon since we are planning on accepting cards this year. It does look like we will have to have a couple more people working.
2. We are getting \$18 a gallon and \$5 a qt already. Same as the last 2 years.
3. We were thinking about \$13/gallon pick your own, and \$15/gallon pre-picked.

Evaluate the extra expenses you would incur this year to protect your customers against COVID-19. Make sure you re-evaluate your price structure to remain profitable while guaranteeing the safety of your customers, employees and family. Costs could increase from additional labor needs, purchase of handwashing station materials and supplies, masks and gloves for employees, purchase of picking containers, incurring credit/debit card processing fees if you have not accepted cards in the past, etc. Costs of supplies may also be higher due to increased demand for products such as toilet paper, single-use towels, soap, disinfectants, sanitizers, etc.

Some pick-your-own operations around the country charge an admission fee to customers who want to pick their own produce. In typical years, this admission fee puts a value on the experience customers have while picking and helps recoup costs of damage or loss caused by customers picking. This year, an admission fee could help producers recoup some of the additional costs incurred. Admission is subject to sales tax, however, so producers would need to collect (or back sales tax out of the admission fee) and remit to the Tennessee Department of Revenue. Sales of farm products you raised are not subject to sales tax.

It may be helpful to offer packages or bundles of products to allow for easy purchase. For example, if you have jams available, you could offer a bundle with 1 gallon of strawberries and a pint of jam for purchase with a single click in an online store for a bundled price. Note that if any item included in a bundle is subject to sales tax, then sales tax must be collected on the entire bundle.

Additional information on pricing is available at <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1803.pdf>.

Additional information about sales tax regulations on farm products in Tennessee is available at <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1806.pdf>

15) How do we ensure sick people do not come to our farm?

While you can never be 100 percent certain, it is important to be clear in your farm policy and messaging that you tell customers not to come to the farm when they are feeling sick. Pre-visit communications about new procedures and rules will be especially important this year. In addition, post

signs prominently where customers will see when they arrive at the farm. A template for one such sign is available for download and customization with your farm information at:

https://foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Food-Retail-Signs_Dont-Shop-Sick_Red.pdf?fwd=no.

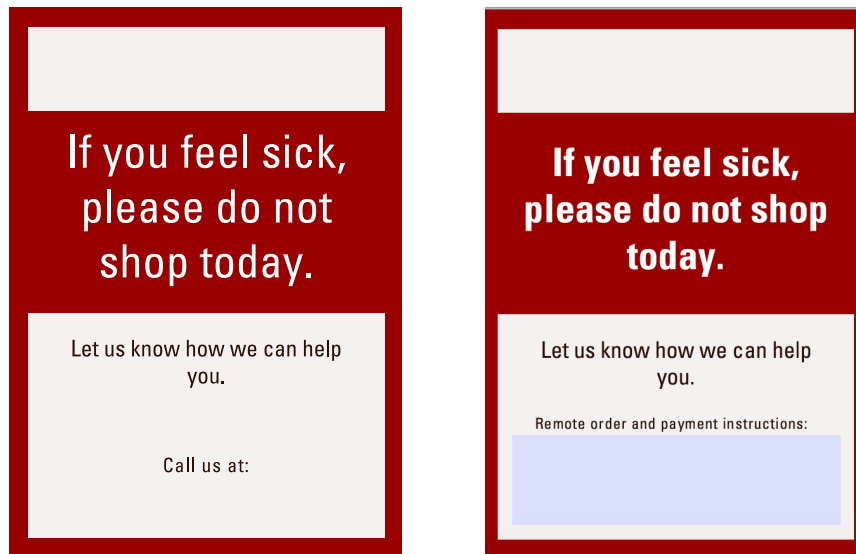


Figure 3. Example signs for customers.

16) How do we need to communicate with customers?

Clear communication with customers will be extremely important this year. Pre-visit communications will help customers determine whether to order pre-picked product or plan to pick their own and help them establish expectations about what they will need to do and expect to experience this year.

Producers should communicate their policies with a positive and helpful tone reminding customers the procedures are in place to help maintain the health and safety of customers and farm employees and families alike. Pre-visit communications should include messaging via:

- Farm Website
- Phone/Voicemail
- Pick TN Products Listing - Producers should update their Pick TN Products listing by emailing pick.tn@tn.gov as often as needed.
- Other Online Listings
- Social Media
- E-mail
- Local Media

Communications and reminders should be given at the farm during the visit through signage, physical indicators for 6-foot social distancing and oral reminders from staff.

Some information that may be helpful to share with pick-your-own customers includes:

- Stay home if you or someone you have contact with is sick.
- Leave children and pets at home.
- Wear a mask according to CDC guidelines.
- Wash your hands before picking and upon leaving the field after picking.
- Practice social distancing at the farm at all times, including in the field.
- Pick only where you are assigned to pick.
- Use only picking containers provided by the farm.
- Do not sample product or eat in the field.
- Plan to pay using credit or debit card, money transfer via Pay Pal or Venmo, or exact change if cash is the only option.
- Tips on properly handling produce.

It can be especially important to inform customers of changes in policies and procedures from previous years. This could include a change from pricing by weight to by the container, implementing an admission fee for picking, adjustments to payment options accepted, etc.

17) I have seen a lot of information about washing produce with detergent as soon as they get it home from the grocery or farm, is this a good thing to recommend to customers?



No, consumers should wash produce with water only and right before eating, not as soon as they get the produce home. Washing with water right before consumption will ensure that they get the highest quality and longest shelf-life out of your product, as water remaining on the fruit or vegetable over time can encourage the growth of decay organisms, which shorten the shelf-life. You can also reinforce this message by printing or sharing this sign on your social media:

http://utvegetable.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UT_washing-produce_COVID-19_Social-Media-Image.png.

Figure 4: Example sign with produce washing instructions.

18) Any special concerns about insurance/liability changes for u-pick because of COVID-19?

It is important to understand coverage or exclusions for communicable diseases in your insurance policy. Discuss with your agent and ask them to point you to wording in the written policy where you can read the language it contains. Many farm and commercial liability policies exclude liability for the transmission or exposure to a communicable disease, bacteria, virus, parasite or other organism (e.g. COVID-19, hepatitis, tuberculosis, measles, etc.). Those policies may include liability coverage for physical injury caused by bacteria, parasite, or other organism contained in food products intended for human consumption (e.g. *E. coli*, salmonella, listeria, and similar food-borne illnesses). Again, it is important to understand what is written in your specific policy. It is also important for farms to show they have developed and implemented plans following recommended procedures to reduce the risk of transmission or exposure.

19) I know there is a lot of unknowns as far as the future, but what changes should we expect fall agritourism operations or is it possible to be close to normal life by then?

The fall season will likely be impacted as well, but to what extent, we do not know at this time. The situation and government guidance continue to evolve daily. Some states have already canceled all festivals through 2020 and some are considering distance learning for schools in the fall or even pushing back the start of the school year until January. It may be wise to plan for the worst possible scenario and hope the situation does not warrant severe restrictions. At the very least, it is likely social distancing will be a way of life for some time. It may be beneficial to take time to reimagine how fall activities and offerings could be provided – How can social distancing be implemented? What procedures can be implemented to help reduce transmission if people can come to the farm for activities? Can you develop an online store for pre-purchase of farm products for drive-through or curbside pick-up? Could you offer virtual field trips to the farm and begin developing materials, videos, etc.? How can you serve and uplift your community during this time?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

View the archived recording of the original webinar session at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWo8iNwUack&feature=youtu.be> (make TINY URL)

Refer to a letter from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture to pick-your-own operators at <https://ag.tennessee.edu/cpa/Documents/Letter%20to%20Pick-Your-Own%20Farms%20from%20TDA.pdf> (Make tiny URL)

UT Extension COVID-19 Resource Pages

- Center for Profitable Agriculture - <http://tiny.utk.edu/CPA-COVID19>
- UT Vegetables - <http://utvegetable.com/covid-19-resources/>



Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development.
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