

EMERGING AGRICULTURAL MARKETS TEAM

UW COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bill Wright

“As a direct marketer, you are in an excellent position to build consumer trust in the food system.”



Fruit and Vegetable Food Safety on the Farm

While stories about contaminated food make headlines from time to time, as a direct marketer you are in an excellent position to build consumer trust in the food system. Unlike many other parts of the food production industry, you conduct business directly with the buyer. This gives you an excellent opportunity to provide clear and accurate information about the food you sell and the precautions you take to keep it safe. In fact, many consumers choose direct-marketed foods because they perceive them to be fresher and safer than those in the supermarket.

Microbial contamination of produce can occur at any point from the field to the table. On the farm, potential sources of contamination seem almost limitless. These areas include soil, irrigation water, animal manure, inadequately composted manure, wild and domestic animals, inadequate field worker hygiene, harvesting equipment, containers, wash and rinse

water, cutting tools, ice, coolers, transportation vehicles and improper storage containers. While this list is certainly not complete, it demonstrates the many ways in which farm fresh products can be contaminated. However, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” so by taking some reasonable precautions, you can greatly reduce the risk of contamination. The following tips will help prevent contamination on your farm.

Manure

While livestock manure is a valuable source of nutrients, it can be a serious source of contamination if it is not properly handled. A few safety tips to keep in mind:

- Store manure as far from produce fields and processing areas as possible.
- Erect physical and wind barriers to prevent manure run-off and wind drift.
- Never side dress crops with fresh manure. Use properly composted manure for any field applications to growing crops.
- Work manure into the soil immediately after application.
- Be sure to document the dates and rates of manure applications in case questions arise in the future.

Work facilities

When harvesting crops, good hygiene practices are especially important. First, emphasize to workers the importance of proper hand washing and stress the importance of food safety and personal hygiene. Second, make sure workers have access to toilet facilities that are clean and well-stocked with plenty of water, soap and disposable paper towels for hand washing. If you are running a “u-pick” operation, also encourage customers to wash their hands before entering the fields.

Harvest, storage, handling and transportation

To prevent contamination, facilities, storage containers and equipment must be thoroughly sanitized. Before the harvest season begins, thoroughly clean and sanitize all storage facilities and any surfaces that may come into contact with produce, including packing tables, storage bins, etc. When the bins are cleaned, cover them when not in use to prevent contamination by birds or other animals. During harvest, knives and any other harvest aids should be cleaned each day and all dirt should be removed from the bottom of harvest containers before they are brought into the washing area. The inside of trucks used to transport produce should also be sanitized before and after each shipment.

Food safety is a critical component of your farm operation and can lead to serious problems if ignored. You may want to consider contacting your local health department or the Department of Agriculture Food Safety department if you have questions about proper sanitation and preventing disease.

For more information about food safety on the farm and a series of self-assessment work sheets, visit www.gaps.cornell.edu/pubs_fsbfs_ws.html.

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