

Safe Farming Practices Offer Hope for Stopping Tainted-Food Crises

With foodborne illness outbreaks linked to produce popping up periodically in the nation's headlines, supermarket managers are grasping for ways to ensure that the fresh fruits and vegetables they sell are safe. But a food-safety specialist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences says farmers have a role to play in reducing the risk of contamination.

Luke LaBorde, associate professor of food science, says growing safe spinach, onions, tomatoes, or other produce is a quality-control issue, and farms that adhere to a series of federally developed recommendations are less likely to become involved in an outbreak of foodborne illness.

"Microbial contamination of fresh produce can happen anywhere," LaBorde says. "Although there are no government-mandated food-safety regulations for farms, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has a list of recommendations—the *Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables*—that offers techniques for preventing on-farm produce contamination."

These techniques—called "good agricultural practices," or GAPs—are designed to prevent contamination of produce on the farm through personal sanitation, correct use of manures and compost, proper bathroom facilities, and monitoring of other areas where contamination can occur.

"Farmers who adhere to these practices are using proven food-safety control measures to prevent crop contamination," LaBorde explains. "There are no laws that require growers to use GAPs, but grocery stores, restaurants, and fresh-cut processors who want to protect themselves from liability are



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demanding that suppliers demonstrate that they are using GAPs."

GAPs guidelines present growers with proven practices and standards in health and hygiene, water quality, soil supplements, and environmental hazards. To provide grocery stores and restaurants with evidence that they are following scientifically supported practices, growers typically must submit to an inspection from an independent, third-party auditor at some point during the harvest season.

The Fresh Produce Audit Verification program, a new U.S. Department of Agriculture service, is available through funding support from the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. In addition, Penn State Cooperative Extension and the Department of Food Science are developing a GAPs educational program to help growers understand farm food-safety risks and develop a food-safety plan.

Visitors to Penn State's GAPs Web site (foodsafety.psu.edu/gaps)

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can access background information on the audit process, forms for conducting a self-inspection, templates for writing their safety plan, instructions on how to arrange for a third-party audit, and links to other farm food-safety resources.

"One day, we'll see more implementation of GAPs, and farm

inspectors and consumers will have a way to identify the inspected farms—perhaps a placard or label at the grocery store," LaBorde says. "But right now, the burden is on the consumer to ask the right questions. You can ask the produce grower at a roadside stand or farmers' market or the produce manager in a grocery store if GAPs were used. If they don't know, you can decide whether the risk is acceptable to you."

LaBorde reminds consumers that, despite the publicity accorded to foodborne illness outbreaks, the risk of buying contaminated product is quite low. "We don't hear about the 99.99 percent of the produce that's perfectly safe," he says. "When we have tainted products shipped in from different places in this or other countries, we hear a lot about it. It's a small amount, but the implications are devastating, not only for the economic viability of the industry, but also to the people who get sick."

—Gary Abdullah