

U-PICKS AND GOOD AG PRACTICES

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As we near the time of year when customers frequent U-pick operations, growers should give some thought to minimizing risks associated with customers picking produce on your farm. This is actually one of the concepts with the GAPS (Good Agricultural Practices) program. Of particular concern is minimizing microbial contamination to the produce. There are many opportunities for contamination to occur during the production, harvest and post-harvest handling of produce. Since customers do the harvesting in the U-pick operation, they need to be made aware of how to prevent contaminating the produce. Some possible sources of contamination include customers having dirty hands, pets being allowed in the fields, and dirty harvest containers.

Customer education is an important component in minimizing contamination risks associated with dirty hands. However, this sanitation information may go against what a lot of people think about in terms of going to the farm. Small signs can be posted directing the customer to the handwashing facilities and stating the reasons for handwashing.

Encourage customers to wash their hands before entering the field. As a grower you may fear insulting the customer by asking them to wash their hands before picking produce, but many customers will find it reassuring that the farm owner is concerned with the crop and the customers' safety. Proper handwashing stations should be provided with restrooms. Many families come to the farm with small children who will likely have to use the restroom while they are there. Even if you don't have restrooms, handwashing stations are still a good idea. Make certain to keep the handwashing area and restroom clean and properly stocked with soap and towels.

Another educational opportunity is to educate the customer about how to properly wash their hands. There are leaflets available from VCE on proper handwashing. These could be made available to the customers and a sign with the basic handwashing steps posted over the sink. The majority of people are not aware of proper handwashing practices. Have you ever really thought about how to properly wash your hands? After wetting the hands with clean, warm water, applying soap, and working up a lather, the hands should be rubbed together for at least 20 seconds. This is about how long it takes to sing the ABC song; try that the next time you wash your hands. Then clean under the nails and between the fingers, and rinse under clean, running water. Then dry your hands with a single use towel.

Customers should be informed of the dangers of bringing their pets into the fields. Lots of people regard their pets as a member of the family, but when they come to the U-pick operation the family pet should not be allowed. The potential of what could happen is pretty basic. It may not bother the pet owner, but the next unsuspecting customer would not be appreciative. Try to minimize birds and other wildlife in the field as fecal contamination from the wildlife can also occur.

Finally, make certain the picking containers you're providing are clean. The containers should be rinsed and sanitized if they are used repeatedly. If they've been stored over the winter be certain to clean them. It would be very easy for these to have mice or rat droppings in them.

The suggestions mentioned here are just a fraction of what's described in *Food Safety Begins on the Farm, A Grower's Guide*. If you don't have a copy, send me (rprunty@vt.edu) or your local agent an email or note and we'll be happy to provide you a copy.

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