

Food Pantry Produce Donations

Grower Information

Do those working on the farm know about good agricultural practices?

Annual training helps workers remember safe food practices and is an opportunity to provide updates on new procedures.

Does your farm have policies on when people should not work around food?

Workers who are physically ill (i.e., diarrhea, vomiting, sore throat) should not harvest, clean, or pack fresh produce.

Are hand-washing stations and restrooms on your farm easily accessible to workers at all times?

Fecal matter and contaminated hands are major carriers of harmful bacteria and viruses that can be spread onto produce.

Are you sure the water source is safe to use on fresh produce?

Irrigation and cleaning water should be potable and free of harmful bacteria. Testing annually provides documentation that the water is drinkable. Municipal water supplies are tested regularly, but well water or surface water requires annual tests for presence of fecal contamination. These sources of water have a higher risk for harmful bacteria being present.

Has production soil been tested to ensure there are no heavy metals, high salt and nitrate levels, and fecal coliforms?

High concentrations of these substances are toxic to humans and can cause serious health effects. Knowledge of the previous use of the land and location is critical.

What type of fertilizer/manure do you use on your farm?

Raw manure and improperly treated compost have been linked to major foodborne illness outbreaks. Raw manure should be applied at least 120 days prior to harvest. Composting should be documented to ensure that proper time and temperature is achieved.

Are produce items protected from wildlife?

Wildlife will always be around produce fields, but it is important to control animals as much as possible (i.e., with fences) and have policies in place to avoid harvesting produce items that have come in contact with animal feces. This includes bird droppings.

Are pets allowed within your growing areas?

Pets should not be allowed into growing areas as they and their feces carry harmful bacteria, viruses, and parasites.

Do you have a shed or barn that you use to pack harvested produce?

Buildings and all work surfaces should be made of cleanable materials and be cleaned regularly. A rodent and pest control plan should also be in place.

What are the cleaning procedures for foods and food contact surfaces?

Harvesting equipment, bins, and food contact surfaces should be cleaned and sanitized regularly with potable water and a sanitizing agent. If appropriate, produce should be rinsed to remove soil and, in some cases, undergo further cleaning with additional agents, such as bleach water.

How are donated items transported to the food pantry?

You should use clean boxes or bins for contact with the produce. Vehicles used should be clean and covered. For longer trips, produce should be kept at appropriate storage temperature to avoid quality and spoilage concerns.

What kind of record-keeping system is in place?

You should have a record of the following for all produce that leaves your farm: location of harvest, names of harvest workers, amount of harvested product, amount distributed by location, and amount returned.

Records of any critical testing, temperatures, concentrations, composting, cleaning, and training should be available.



Donations from local fruit and vegetable growers are important to food pantries. Food pantry clients want in-season produce, and this type of food provides nutritional benefits to them. Because food safety begins at the farm level, food pantry workers may ask questions to ensure donated foods have a low food safety risk. This publication provides information to growers about safe on-farm food practices and information to food pantry workers about how to keep donated produce safe.

Food Pantry Worker Information

Arrival at the food pantry

It is important to know as much as possible about donated products. If the “if in doubt, throw it out” approach is used, there may be occasions when perfectly good produce is not distributed. The more you know about the produce, the less that will be wasted. If you are able to talk to the donor, capture as much information as possible. If no one is around when the donation is made, have small forms available for donors to fill out. Remind growers that the information is requested only to ensure proper handling at all steps in the donation process and that the Good Samaritan Law protects them from liability (see sidebar). This is a wonderful advertising tool for growers. See sample donation form below.

Safe handling practices for donated produce

While most fresh produce is not classified as a potentially hazardous food, a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found 46 percent of reported foodborne illnesses were due to contaminated produce. No one wants to become ill with a foodborne illness, especially those of limited means or precarious health. This is especially important at food pantries, where donated produce is often at the peak of quality. Let your clients know it is important to wash fresh produce before eating it.

Raw agricultural foods do not have a kill step of cooking, which destroys disease-causing bacteria from the soil or viruses on even healthy people’s hands. Fortunately, it is easy to control for these risks. Remember three words: chill, separate, and clean.

- **Chill** - Keep fresh produce cool as appropriate for type. This keeps quality good and keeps the produce safe.
- **Separate** – Keep fresh, unwashed produce away from other food items. Use clean containers or bags.
- **Clean** – Keep surfaces, containers, and hands clean by washing and sanitizing regularly.

Pantry workers should:

- Keep yourself healthy – don’t help at the food pantry if you are coughing, sneezing, have a sore throat, fever, diarrhea, or jaundice.
- Wash your hands often the right way (lather with soap for at least 10 seconds, rinse well, and dry).

- Wear gloves after washing hands if handling food directly.
- Protect the food by keeping it in appropriate packaging and at safe temperatures.

Storage between arrival and distribution

- Keep the produce at the appropriate storage temperature. Remember, different produce items have different requirements for storage temperatures and humidity levels; some items can keep at room temperature (i.e., uncut tomatoes), but others are best to keep cool (i.e., strawberries, salad greens) for safety and quality.
- If stored at room temperature, be sure produce is protected from any pests, insects, or other airborne contaminants.
- Practice FIFO (first in first out) of items on hand to ensure perishable items are rotated out while still of good quality. Most fresh produce will retain freshness for a few days without any safety risks.
- Provide clean produce bags for clients to put fresh produce in to prevent cross contamination.

The Good Samaritan Law

The Good Samaritan Law (Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Law 1996/ Public Law 104-210) protects those who donate food from any liability so long as no gross negligence has been displayed while handling the food.

Helpful resources

Composting, <http://www.agronext.iastate.edu/immag/pubsco.html#extension>

Food Safety from farm to table, <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsafety/>

Fresh Produce Guide, <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID=12599>

I Know Produce – Identification, storage, and handling tips for fruits, herbs, nuts, and vegetables, <http://legacy.pma.com/producedb/index.cfm>

Garden Gleaning – A Toolkit for Growers and Food Shelves, www.gardengleaning.org

Guide to Using Liquid Sanitizer Washes, PM1974D, <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/>

Sample donation receiving form

Thank you for your donation of fresh produce. We will make sure your items are put to good use. To help us do that, please complete this form and attach it to your donated items.

1. Type of produce?	
2. When was it harvested?	
3. Date and time it was dropped off here?	
4. Has the produce been washed?	
5. Has the produce been refrigerated prior to donation?	
6. Any specific production practices used you would like to share?	
7. Special instructions or recipes to share?	
8. Name and location of the producer?	
9. Received by (name of food pantry worker):	

If pantry workers accept fresh produce in person, also note the following if you are able to observe.

- Is the produce protected in a clean container or bag?
- Was the vehicle used to deliver the donation clean and the produce protected from pets, debris, or other contaminants?
- What is the temperature outside and how long has the harvested produce been at that temperature?

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