

Farm Manager's Employee Training Checklist

Harvest-to-Sale Training Topics for Small Produce Farms

Lisa Baker, Bakers' Acres LLC

2017

Minnesota Institute for
Sustainable Agriculture

As farmers, we are constantly working, making decisions, delegating responsibilities, and reprioritizing our day-to-day tasks. Many of us are also training employees along the way. Sometimes it is easy to teach concepts or skills, while other times we forget to mention key details. Or, we forget that we know an incredible number of things based on experience which our employees do not know, and we fail to pass on our knowledge.

Whether you're a beginning vegetable farmer or a veteran farmer, this checklist is meant to help you remember all of the topics important for your farm employees' responsibilities, including concepts like shelf life and respiration, food safety practices, general safety policies, and post-harvest handling procedures from the field through cooling and cleaning to the point of sale.

Use this list to ensure you're covering all the topics relevant to your harvest crew's post-harvest handling procedures. Adjust or add to it as needed.

1. Importance of high quality product

- Farm mission and products.** What we stand for, know our customers, what we offer to our customers.
- Define quality and shelf life.**
- Describe the post-harvest handling** cold chain from harvest through cooling, cleaning, grading, storage, packing, transportation, to the end customer (e.g., CSA box, farmers' market, co-op display, restaurant kitchen, etc.)

2. Safety policies

- Every person on the farm is responsible for their general safety, the safety of others, and food safety. (e.g., Policies for Tools, Machinery, Electric, Chemicals, Drug Use, Personal Belongings)

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- Risk management / on-farm food safety.** Safe practices are important because they directly reflect quality and the reputation of the farm, which affects business sustainability. An illness outbreak could destroy the farm.
- Working in risky environments / on the farm.** Do not lift crates or boxes that are too heavy to do so safely. Be aware of other employees and how what you do affects them (e.g. not paying attention to where the tractor loader is swinging can hurt someone on the ground or a building, etc.). Protect yourself with ear protection when using loud equipment, etc.
- Emergency preparedness.** E.g., Illness outbreak, injury, severe weather.
- Pack shed workflows** to prevent cross-contamination
- Farm & field layout**
 - Maps
 - Parking, smoking, and break areas
 - Location of hand washing sink, bathroom, harvest equipment, and packaging materials

3. Harvest crew job responsibilities

- The farm is a business.**
 - a. Your work as an employee impacts the bottom line. It's not just about the joys of working outside; it is hard work and sometimes the outdoor conditions are unpleasant.
 - b. The more efficient you are, the more money the farm can make. The less efficient you are, the less money the farm makes. This affects how much the farm has available to pay workers.
- Preparedness expectations.** Arrive on time, sober, not hung-over. No alcohol or illegal drug use on the farm.
- Efficiency expectations.** Work quickly, carefully, and efficiently; know your current task and the next one; follow bunching, harvesting benchmarks.
- Attire.** Rain boots/gear, closed toe for protection, long-sleeve and short-sleeve shirt options, hat option for shade, hat or hair binder for long hair.

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- Communication.** E.g., With visitors, with your farm manager, with each other, photos policy, social media policy.

4. Respiration process

- Define respiration and high/moderate/low categories. Explain why we do what we do (e.g., Why we harvest at 7 a.m., use tarps for shade, etc.).
- Review storage poster.
- Handling processes for high respirators (e.g., How to slow deterioration in the field, create shade, harvest early in the day, cooling, humidity), moderate/low respirators, cold-sensitive crops / chilling injury.

5. Food safety responsibilities

- Food safety is important for customer satisfaction and building your business.
- Compromised populations.** Just because you're healthy, doesn't mean others won't get sick from contaminated food. People your employees care about (e.g., your kids, niece/nephew, grandparents) are higher-risk eaters.
- 4 W's (Workers, Water, Waste, Wildlife)
- Contaminants/pathogens overview
- High-risk crops
- Hand washing
- Sanitizing crates
- Documentation
- Imagine your customer standing behind you – what will make them satisfied with this process?

6. Practices in the pack shed

- Pack shed prep.**
 - Check harvest board or lists.
 - Set up (tables, wagons, crates, bins ready for field).
 - Fill wash tanks.
 - Add sanitizer if applicable.

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Pack shed cleanup.

- Rinse out wash tubs, buckets, bins, crates
- Sanitize crates if necessary
- Wash walls, work surfaces, spray tables
- Crate storage
- Discards to compost pile or livestock
- Sweep floor, spray/squeegee, clean drains
- Bathroom supplies, checklist
- Livestock chores

7. Practices in the field

- Harvest board** – How your employees should use it
- Harvest tools and equipment** – location and procedures (knives, holsters, crates, bins, field hydro-cooling, rubberbands; check out/check in and cleaning process, gloves, harvest wagons, buckets; prep for field-packed crops)
- Consequence of not having clean and sharp tools
- Share harvest, washing, and packing procedures for each crop
- Food safety in the field (e.g., bins off ground is important for keeping product clean)
- Slowing deterioration in the field
- Ripeness (e.g., broccoli, tomato harvest stages) and 1st sorting/grading (cull)
- Aesthetics / grading – Ask yourself, would I want to buy it?
- Techniques in the field – Why and how to move fast and efficiently (e.g., move logically: use your right hand for cutting, left hand for moving bin down the row, etc.)
- What does an ideal bunch look like – Pick out yellow or damaged leaves while in the field
- Techniques in the pack shed – Basic tips – thinking ahead
- Let employees know the farm manager is thinking about ten million things at one time
- Stay present at the task at hand. Limit conversations.
- Ask questions, use your farm manager as a resource
- Careful handling (i.e., produce should be seen not heard)
- Field packing process
- Examples

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- Transport from field to pack shed
- Documentation (e.g., harvest board volume, initials, and notes)

8. Cleaning & cooling

- Water use – sometimes for cleaning, cooling, or both
- Concept of hydro-cooling – why it's important
- Workflow detail, equipment use (e.g., dollies, tables, hoses)
- Tools overview (e.g., aprons, tubs, spray tables, surface sanitizer)
- Wash equipment overview (e.g., brush washer, how it works, when use it, safety)
- Wash tanks (e.g., filling, temp, wash water sanitizer – why some farms use it)
- 2nd sorting/grading (e.g., cull cracked/bruised produce before washing; risks/effects of not culling bad produce; pathogens spread in wash tank water)
- Cooler organization (e.g., labels, “last in first out”)
- Examples in workflow
 - Unwashed crops to cooler – cabbage
 - Field packing to cooler – cabbage
 - Unwashed crops to storage room – tomatoes
 - Washed crops to cooler – carrots
 - Washed crops to drying – greens
 - Washed crops to packing – cucumbers
- Documentation (e.g., water sanitizer log)

9. Sorting, grading & culling

- Define USDA AMS Grade A, processing quality, canning quality, etc.
- Explain which level of quality each of your customers expects and what that looks like when sorting and grading
- Risks/effects of not culling bad produce (e.g., rots others while in storage or shipping)

10. Packing & packaging

- Materials (e.g., box sizes, butcher paper, clamshells, bags, liners)

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- Packing board / list (e.g., pack size and materials instructions, customer)
- Weighing
- Bagging (e.g., difference for CSA vs. retail)
- Wholesale packaging and quality, labels and invoicing
- CSA – Packline setup (e.g., box size, box liner, move produce crates to packing area if in cooler), heaviest product on bottom, aesthetics

11. Storage & transport

- Post and review the storage poster from MISA .
- First-in-first-out tomato shelves
- Cooler storage (e.g., maintain humidity with plastic/covered bins, ethylene overview)
- Chilling-sensitive crops – reminder – effects of chilling injury
- Curing and storage crops overview
- Maintenance and cleaning of storage areas: check for pest/rodent issues, etc.
- Documentation (e.g., add storage notes to harvest board; attach date label to crate in cooler or tomato shelf)
- Inspecting and cleaning the vehicle
- Loading (e.g., last in first out, shifting while driving)

12. Point of sale: Customer service , display, talking with customers

- Wholesale to restaurant, distributor, cafeteria
 - Use a numbered invoice with tracking information
 - Delivery procedure at location (e.g., which door, who receives produce, do they inspect on delivery?)
 - Signature acknowledging receipt on your invoice copy
- Wholesale to co-op or retail display
 - Use a numbered invoice with tracking information
 - Delivery procedure at location (e.g., which door, who receives produce)
 - Signature acknowledging receipt on invoice copy
 - Do you need to deliver retail signage for the co-op to display with your product?
- Farmers' market procedures

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- Display
- Tips to maintain quality at a long market
- Signage
- EBT processing if applicable
- CSA
 - Communication with drop-site hosts, customers
 - Signage
 - Drop-site protocol: location and proper handling for deliveries