



Food Safety Questions to Ask Your Farmer

The [University of Minnesota Extension's On-Farm Food Safety Questions](#) was used to develop this document.

A frank conversation is a good way to ensure the produce you receive is grown, harvested, and packaged using best food safety practices.

Fact: Food contamination risk cannot be completely eliminated, but it can be minimized.

- When buying produce directly from a farm for your food service operation, ask farmers about their food safety practices.
- Farm visits are another great option for learning about a grower's food safety practices.

Ask the right questions to learn about farm food safety practices

Many institutions and businesses purchase produce directly from nearby farmers. The University of Minnesota Extension created a list of questions about on-farm food safety practices that food service workers can ask farmers when considering buying fresh fruits and vegetables directly from a farm.

These questions are not about food safety in your food service kitchen. Instead, they focus on the steps that the farmer took to minimize the risk of contamination as the food was grown, harvested, and transported to your kitchen door.

The questions should be a guide for an informed discussion with a farmer about their on-farm food safety practices. As you develop a relationship with a farmer and begin to buy their food, you might ask questions about delivery schedule, pricing, and container and pack size. Food safety is another important part of this conversation.

Minimize the risk

Produce is grown in the soil and under the sky, so there will always be some risk of contamination. While the risk cannot be eliminated, it can be minimized by using best practices to ensure the safety of consumers.

Visiting the farm is a great way to get to know the farmer, their operation and food safety practices. Most farmers are very committed to on-farm food safety. They should not be offended if you ask about their food safety practices. If done in a conversational way, most farmers will be happy to talk about their practices. Consider using the following questions as a guide:

Talking with farmers about food safety

Opening questions

- Can you tell me about your food safety practices?
- How do you address food safety on your farm?

Listen for these words or concepts:

- We have a written food safety plan.
- We test well water for bacteria every year.
- We train all staff on our food safety protocols including hand washing, good personal hygiene and reporting illness or injury.
- About manure:
 - We don't use raw manure; or
 - We apply manure in the fall; or
 - We use composted manure.
- We have attended a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) or Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) training.
- We haven't paid for a GAP audit, but have adopted the on-farm food safety practices that are relevant to the farm.
 - School nutrition departments are required to have a written food safety plan, often referred to as the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) manual. A GAP plan is similar to this, but for farmers, and is not required.
- We have passed a GAP audit, or intend to schedule an on-farm food safety audit. (Note: GAP audits are not required. Very few Minnesota farmers are GAP audited, so don't expect the farm to have an audit certificate.)

Farm and production practices:

- Do you have a written food safety plan or standard operating procedures related to food safety?
 - Consider looking for a different farmer if they say no or do not seem to take good food safety precautions.
- Can you tell me about your process for washing produce?
 - Produce is not required to be rinsed or washed, but if it is, the water used must be potable (drinkable).
 - Some farms treat wash water with a sanitizer, but there is no requirement to do so.
 - Wash water in tanks or sinks should be changed as needed to maintain cleanliness.
- How often do you have the well water tested for contaminants?
 - It is recommended that well water be tested for generic *E. coli* at least once per year.
- What do you do to keep livestock and other animals (including pets) out of growing and packing areas?
 - Employees should be taught to look for signs of animal intrusion prior to harvest.
 - They should not pick anything that may be contaminated with feces, nibble marks or other animal evidence.

Worker health and hygiene

- Do you have health and hygiene training for employees? What does it cover?

- Listen for training on hand washing procedures and illness and injury reporting.
- Are restrooms with hand washing facilities including single-use towels, soap and clean running water available to all workers?
 - Note: sanitizing gels are not a substitute for handwashing.
- Are workers excluded from handling food products if they are ill or have a fever or diarrhea?

Packaging and tool cleanliness

- How will the produce be packaged?
- Have boxes been used previously? If so, for what?
 - Boxes should appear like new, clean and intact, when the produce arrives.
 - Boxes that have held meat or poultry should not be used to transport produce.
- How often do you clean your harvest tools and containers?
 - There is no one right answer, but they should have some kind of cleaning schedule or routine.
- Where do you pack your produce?
 - They may field pack or have a packing house.
 - Produce should be kept off the ground.
 - Food contact surfaces in packing areas should be regularly cleaned and sanitized.
- How is the produce kept cool and covered before and during delivery?
 - Storing the product in a cooler is not required, but lengthens the shelf life.
 - If a cooler is used, it must be kept clean.
 - Delivery vehicles should be kept clean.

References

1. [Minnesota Department of Education Farm to School](#) Program features step-by-step guidance for setting up your program.
2. [The Public Health Law Center](#) offers resources addressing legal issues of Farm to School.
3. [Cornell Food Safety and GAPS Information](#)