

Ensuring Garden Produce is Safe for Donation

Fresh garden produce is an excellent gift to share but surfaces of fruits and vegetables can harbor microorganisms that cause illness. Following these steps will help reduce the risk of contamination of fresh produce.

Safe Location and Soil

- Protect your garden from pets, poultry, and wildlife as well as water runoff from roofs or compost piles.
- If composting at home, use a compost thermometer to ensure adequate temperatures (130-140°F) are reached to inactivate pathogens. Purchase soil and compost from a trusted source. Fresh (un-composted) manure should not be used near vegetable gardens.

Safe Water

- Use clean, drinkable water for irrigating vegetable gardens. Contamination transferred to produce from non-potable water can be impossible to remove.
- Rinse off garden soil if necessary but many fruits and vegetables, like strawberries and tomatoes, do not need to be rinsed before donating. Let the receiver know the produce will need to be rinsed before use.
- If produce does need to be washed before donating, such as carrots or green onions, rinse with fresh potable water. Moisture can promote bacterial growth and speed up spoilage so produce needs to air dry before being packed into containers.

Good Hygiene

- Prior to harvesting, wash hands thoroughly with soap and water. Do not harvest if you feel ill or are experiencing symptoms such as vomiting or diarrhea.
- Clean Surfaces and Containers
- As you harvest, place produce directly into a container that has been cleaned well before use or into containers (such as boxes) lined with chemical-free plastic bags. Do not reuse plastic grocery bags and do not seal the bags.

Fresh Produce

- Produce should be left whole to maintain its' shelf life. You can remove damaged or inedible leaves (e.g., outside leaves of a cabbage or the tops of beets) but keep post-harvest handling to a minimum.
- Time your harvests so deliveries can be made immediately, the fresher the better for quality and shelf life.
- If you store produce in the refrigerator, ensure it is wrapped or boxed and stored above any raw meat, poultry, or eggs. Do not store loose produce directly in/on refrigerator shelves or drawers.
- Only donate fresh, high-quality produce that you would feel comfortable consuming or serving to others.

Resources:

Guide to Handling Fresh Produce, Colorado State University Extension <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/foodnut/09380.pdf>

Preventing E. coli from Garden to Plate, Colorado State University Extension

<https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/foodnut/09369.pdf>

Safe Food Facts for Community Gardens, Colorado State University Extension <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/foodnut/09381.pdf>

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