

The situation with current COVID-19 pandemic is escalating unpredictably and as we are monitoring the virus spread in RI, here are some tips for farmers to practice safe food production.

This information is adapted from a blog post by Chris Callahan from University of Vermont.

Considerations for Fruit and Vegetable Growers Related to Coronavirus & COVID-19

The current COVID-19 pandemic is a common concern and many are wondering what they can and should do. The information here is intended to help guide the fruit and vegetable farming community. ***If you have concerns or additional suggestions please email us (email addresses at the end) or the RI DEM Division of Agriculture.***

Background

COVID-19 is the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (“the novel coronavirus”). Symptoms include fever, cough, and shortness of breath, and may appear 2-14 days after exposure. While the majority of COVID-19 illnesses are mild, it can result in severe and fatal illness, particularly in the elderly and among those with severe underlying health conditions. Federal and State agencies are working hard to better understand the virus, how to control its spread, and how to treat those infected. One of the key things we can all do is to limit and slow the spread of COVID-19 to provide time for this understanding to develop and to not overwhelm the medical system. Much more information is available at the [CDC Situational Summary page](#).

What Should Growers Do?

1. **Stay Away from Produce if Sick** – If someone is sick, they should be nowhere near fruit and vegetables that others are going to eat. This is likely already part of your farm’s food safety plan and policies, but this is a good reminder to emphasize and enforce the policy. Make sure employees stay home if they feel sick and send them home if they develop symptoms at work. Consider posting signs asking customers not to shop at your farm stand if they have symptoms.
2. **Practice Physical Distancing** – By putting a bit more space between you and others you can reduce your chances of getting ill. This might mean limiting or prohibiting farm visitors or reducing the number of off-farm meetings you attend in person. Avoid shaking hands and other physical contact. This also reduces the risk of your produce coming into contact with someone who is ill before it heads to market.
3. **Wash Your Hands** – Reinforce the importance of washing hands well when arriving at work, when changing tasks (e.g. moving from office work to wash/pack), before and after eating, after using the bathroom, before putting on gloves when working with produce, and after contact with animals. Soap + water + 20 seconds or more are needed to scrub all surfaces of your hands and fingers thoroughly, then dispose of paper towels in a covered container.
4. **Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Drying** –Viruses can be relatively long-lasting in the environment and have the potential to be transferred via food or food contact surfaces. In this early stage, there is no indication that this virus has spread via food of any type. However, there’s no better time than the present to review, improve, and reinforce your standard operating procedures for cleaning, sanitizing, and drying any food contact surfaces, food handling equipment, bins, and tools. Remember, cleaning means using soap and water, sanitizing is using a product labeled for sanitizing, and drying means allowing the surfaces to dry completely before use.
5. **Plan for Change** – Many produce farms are lean operations run by one or two managers and a minimal crew. Do you have a plan for if you become severely ill? How do things change if half your workforce is out sick? More business and labor planning guidance is available at the [Rhode Island Food Policy Council Covid-19 Response Resource](#).

*For more information on how to **protect yourself**, please visit [CDC How to prepare for Corona virus](#)*

What Should Markets and Farmers Markets Do?

1. **Everything Above** – Growers, retail food market owners, and farmers market managers should do all the things above. Does your market have a hand washing station? More guidance for food and lodging businesses is available from the [Rhode Island Department of Health](#).
2. **Communicate with your Customers** – Consider reaching out to your customers and recommend they stay home if they are ill. Have you informed your customers about any changes in your hours or policies?
3. **Consider Alternative Delivery** – Some markets are taking this opportunity to launch pre-ordering and electronic payment options to enable social distancing at market. Some markets are moving to a drive-through pickup option.
4. **Reinforce the Health Benefits of Fruits and Vegetables** – We are fortunate to have so many growers who do a great job with storage crops and winter production. This means our community has access to fresh fruits and vegetables that are important to their immune systems at this time of need. Be sure to promote the nutritional value of your products! But, keep in mind that promotion of your products should be within reason. Avoid making overly broad or unsupported health claims. Fresh produce contains many minerals and nutrients important for immune health which may reduce the severity and duration of an illness. **Fun Fact:** Pound for pound, that storage cabbage in your cooler has as nearly as much vitamin C as oranges.

What should CSA Farmers do?

1. **Communicate with your CSA Members** – Consider reaching out to your members to let them know of any payment plans you can offer, to help ease the burden for families that are coping with unexpected loss of income or childcare costs. Remind members of your commitment to food safety, but don't make broad claims about the risk of unsafe produce in grocery stores which most people in our communities still rely upon.
2. **Consider your CSA pick up** – Members this year may be more concerned about the space and flow of their CSA pick up, looking for more distance between each other and their produce bags as they gather their veggies. Customers may prefer pre-bagged greens and appreciate other pre-weighted items for ease of selection. There could even be renewed interest in the CSA box model over the CSA mix & match model. Prepare for the need for modifications in order to ease concerns members may be feeling after weeks or months of social distancing.

Please stay safe and stay tuned for further updates as this is a constantly changing scenario.

Thank you,

RI Food Safety Team

(Ananda, Abigail, Christopher, and Sejal)

Ananda.Fraser@dem.ri.gov

Abigail.Phillips@dem.ri.gov

Christopher.Rueckel@dem.ri.gov

Sejal@uri.edu