



Verifying On-Farm Food Safety

Prior to purchasing produce from a local farm, school nutrition operators should visit the farm to observe key food safety practices and ask questions about produce handling. Because a visit will require time from the farmer's schedule as well as your schedule, you may wish to organize a group visit with other school nutrition directors in your purchasing cooperative or local area. Information in this document can be used to ensure that you collect sufficient information on your visit to make an informed decision about purchasing from the farm.

Finding a Farm

Finding farms to work with is the first step. Follow these suggestions to locate farms that may be a good fit for your operation:

- Contact your state farm to school coordinator, if applicable. Check with the state department of education or agriculture to find out if there is a farm-to-school coordinator in your state.
- Contact your state department of agriculture or check their website for lists of farms in your area.
- Contact cooperative extension agent(s) in your area.
- Contact other school nutrition directors in your area who are purchasing local products from farms.
- Talk to farmers at your local farmers' markets.
- Visit www.ams.usda.gov/gapghp for a list of farms that have been certified in Good Agricultural Practices/ Good Handling Practices through USDA's third party audit program.
- Search on farm-to-school or community-based agriculture websites.

What Are Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs)?

GAPs are a collection of principles that apply to on-farm production and post-production processes. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) published guidance in 1998 to outline eight basic principles of microbial food safety within the realm of growing, harvesting, packing, and transporting fresh produce. Using these principles, farmers can develop proactive, preventive controls to reduce the opportunity for microbiological, chemical, and physical hazards that affect the safety of the produce.

Resources:

- Guidance for Industry: Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables (FDA, 1998)
- National GAPs Education Program, Cornell University, <http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/index.html>
- Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN) <http://www.jifsan.umd.edu/training/gaps.php>

Planning Your Farm Visits

Plan to visit the farm and observe food safety practices before purchasing produce. If you plan to purchase products from multiple farms, or are already buying from multiple farms, visit each one.



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Initial Steps

- If you are not already buying from the farm, contact the farmer to explain who you are and your role as a potential buyer for your school nutrition program.
- Ask whether the farmer is interested in being a potential seller to your district. Several conversations may be necessary to determine whether the farmer may want to sell to your school district.
- Explain that your responsibility as a school nutrition director is to ensure that food is purchased from suppliers who have food safety practices in place.
- Explain to the farmer that you would like to observe on-farm food safety practices, such as how produce is harvested, how equipment and facilities are cleaned and sanitized, etc.
- Establish a form of communication. Ask whether it is best for future contact to be by telephone or email.

Scheduling the Visit

- Find out what produce is grown on the farm and when it is harvested. Ask if any produce might be available to observe in the field or after harvest during the visit. Ask whether the farmer will be able to discuss the growing and handling practices of produce that is not currently in season.
- Send the farmer the *Checklist for Retail Purchasing of Local Produce**, or a similar tool, prior to the visit. Explain that you would like to discuss the items on the checklist, and ask the farmer to review it prior to your visit. Explain why these are points of interest.
- Confirm school district requirements for farm liability insurance coverage for any products purchased from the farm. Discuss the requirements with the farmer.
- Determine a date and time to schedule a visit. Be flexible on time of day and day of week because farmers usually work long hours throughout the week that may not align with your hours of operation.
- Determine who will be visiting the farm and with whom you will be visiting at the farm.
- Discuss how much time will be available for the tour and how much time will be available after the tour for additional questions.
- Be sure to get the farm's address, driving directions and instructions on the best location for parking.
- Answer any questions the farmer has about your visit and your expectations.

Preparing for the Farm Visit

- Wear appropriate attire and bring items that may be needed, such as comfortable, closed-toed, sturdy shoes, hats, sunglasses, sunscreen, water, notebook, and pen/pencil. Be prepared to walk around the farm and be outside for extended periods of time.
- Restroom facilities may or may not be available. Ask ahead and plan appropriately.
- Ask the farmer if photographs or videos are allowed and explain how these may be used, such as appearing on the school district's website. This exposure may enhance the farmer's recognition in the community. If using photographs or videos, a signed release form is recommended and may be required by your district.
- Confirm employer insurance policies for accidents or injuries that could occur during the site visit.





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Farm Operations to Observe

During your visit, ask questions about food safety practices related to each area of the operation. Review and discuss items on the *Checklist for Retail Purchasing of Local Produce**, or similar checklist, as appropriate. Be prepared to follow any sanitation and safety procedures required by the farm. You may be asked to wear hairnets, gloves, and shoe coverings. Observe as much of the farm operation as possible, including the following:

- Products currently growing in the field.
- Equipment and supplies, such as tractors, harvesting containers, harvesting equipment, cleaning and sanitizing equipment, and delivery trucks.
- Facilities, including packing sheds, on-site storage locations, and chemical storage facilities, if applicable.
- Storing, harvesting, or packing process, if possible.

Food Safety Discussion Topics

Discuss the following topics, using the *Checklist for Retail Purchasing of Local Produce** or a similar checklist, as a guide.

- Land use history
- Soil composition and testing
- Water sources
- Wildlife control
- Composting practices
- Chemical and pesticide management
- Liability insurance
- Traceability methods
- GAPs audit results and documentation, if farm is GAPs certified
- Organic procedures, if applicable
- Handling and processing procedures, if applicable
- Crop selection

Purchasing Discussion Topics

The farm's typical procedures for working with customers may differ from your school district's procedures for working with vendors. Learn how the farmer prefers to do business, and be willing to be flexible, if you can. Ask about delivery practices. Remember that farmers typically receive payment immediately and may not be willing or able to wait several weeks.

Delivery capacity

- Does the farmer deliver?
- Can the farmer deliver in refrigerated trucks?
- How often is the farmer willing to deliver?
- What day(s) of week and time(s) of day could deliveries take place? What day(s) of week and time(s) of day could produce be picked up, if deliveries are not possible?
- Does the farmer currently work with any distributors?



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Ordering and Payment

- How does the farmer handle ordering?
- How does the farmer invoice?
- How does the farmer accept payment?
- Would the farmer be willing to negotiate an alternate arrangement to his/her standard practices?

Farm Operations to Observe

- Thank the farmer for his or her time.
- Provide any additional information requested by the farmer in a timely manner.
- Invite the farmer to visit your facility.

References

Cornell National GAPs Program <http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/>

*Iowa State University, Checklist for Retail Purchasing of Local Produce <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM2046A.pdf>

Iowa State University Resources, Local Foods: From Farm to Food Service <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/HRIM/LocalFoods/From%20Farm%20to%20Foodservice.htm>

Penn State University <http://extension.psu.edu/food-safety/farm>

University of California Davis GAPs <http://ucgaps.ucdavis.edu/>

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service through an agreement with Institute of Child Nutrition at The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights; Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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Updated: 02/2016

