

Farm Food Safety Plans for Urban Farms

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Regardless of your farm size or production system for fruits and vegetables, it is a good business practice to have a farm food safety plan. This plan will help you identify, assess, and manage food safety risks on your farm and ensure safe production of fruits and vegetables for your customers. This plan is unique to your farm and is where you outline policies and standard operating procedures (SOPs), as well as keep records to show you are following these policies and procedures. Sample plans are available, but it is critical that you use any template as a guide and write your own plan that describes your farm. There are four primary categories of a farm food safety plan: general farm information, production activities, harvest activities, and post-harvest handling.



Fig. 1. An urban farm in Covington, KY.



General Farm Information

Management Responsibilities

Someone who manages day-to-day production activities should be responsible for writing and maintaining the food safety plan. For smaller farms, the owner-operator may be doing all the farm work and be completely responsible for all aspects of the farm food safety plan. List contact information for the responsible individual for emergency purposes.

Farm Description

Include a description of the location, crops grown, historical land-use, and area under cultivation (sum of the square footage of greenhouses, high tunnels, field plots and/or raised beds). Also include a farm map which can be as simple as a hand-drawn map, a computer-generated graphic (Fig. 2), or a more formal labeled satellite image.



Fig. 2. Urban farm map graphic with production areas labeled. Calculate square footage of area in cultivation by measuring the length and width of each individual section (field plots, greenhouses, high tunnels, and/or raised beds) and multiply to get the area of that section. Add all the individual sections together for the total square footage.

Record Keeping

Documentation is key to tracking farm activities and determining production risks. Important records are identified in the companion risk assessment document.

Traceability

Growers need to have a system in place to track crops back to the field or bed they were grown in and then traced forward to the buyer. This is commonly done with codes based on field, date of harvest, and who harvested the crop. In the rare event of a product recall, having this information will allow you to quickly communicate to consumers and health officials.

Corrective Actions

Outline procedures to address and correct any problems and how you prevent potentially contaminated crops from reaching consumers. It is important to identify the root cause to prevent a problem from happening again. Document corrective actions, including the issue, what actions were taken, and any newly implemented prevention steps.

Production Activities

Site Assessment

Perform a visual inspection and note the site history - including crops previously grown and products applied - to identify potential risks. This is important in urban areas where sites may have been used for industrial purposes. Soil tests can identify risks of contaminated soil. Production areas should be viewed after a heavy rain to observe flooding potential and runoff patterns, with source identification of water running onto production areas. Include a description of how adjacent land is being used and note animal traffic patterns.

Worker Health & Hygiene

Employees should not handle produce if they are sick and prevention instructions should be clear in the food safety plan. Access to a toilet and handwashing facilities is important to prevent the spread of microorganisms that can cause illnesses. Simple handwashing stations can be inexpensive to build (Fig. 3). How and when the facilities are maintained should be outlined in the plan.

Agricultural Inputs

Keep an updated list of all inputs used on the farm, including where products like pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers were purchased and when products were applied. A private applicator pesticide license may be required to buy and apply certain pesticide products.



Fig. 3. A simple handwashing station made from a discarded pallet to ensure personal hygiene on an urban farm.

Agricultural Water

Many urban growers use city or municipal water to irrigate crops. Water companies are required to issue an annual quality report, which can often be found on their website. Print the report and keep it with your record. Water collection systems (rain barrels, for example) are common on urban farms. This is considered surface water and poses a higher risk for contamination than municipal water. Note in your plan water sources in use, how water is applied, and how water quality is being monitored.

Animal Control

Pets and wild animals are frequent visitors on urban farms. Describe how you exclude, monitor, and handle evidence of animals, including birds, in the production areas of your farm. Explain how you avoid harvesting from areas where animals have been (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Animal feeding damage on zucchini. Instructions on how this area would be flagged to prevent harvest should be included in the food safety plan.

Vehicles, Equipment, Tools, and Utensils

List the different mechanical and manual tools used on the farm. For shared-use equipment that is borrowed from off the farm, list the equipment, cleaning and maintenance performed, and notes about the place from which it was borrowed. Include instructions for performing and tracking cleaning and sanitizing procedures.

Harvest Activities

Preharvest Assessment

Explain how before harvest, production areas are visually inspected to identify potential contamination sources. Instructions for marking spots of concern such as animal or bird feces or evidence of animal feeding damage (Fig. 4) describe how you prevent harvest from those areas.

Containers and Bins

Describe when and how you clean, sanitize, and steps used to prevent containers and bins from being placed directly on the ground (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Plastic bins are easy to clean and sanitize. Use a second bin or another method to keep bins off the ground.

Postharvest Handling

Cooling and Packing

When using water or ice to remove field heat and preserve product quality, the water must be potable and the source identified. Include details of the procedure for transferring produce from harvest bins to boxes or other single use containers for storage (Fig. 6a & 6b).



Fig. 6a. Single use waxed boxes are commonly used to store and transport produce crops.



Fig. 6b. Wooden pallets can be used to keep boxes off the floor.

Storage

Describe how and where produce is stored. The temperature should be monitored and recorded when using cold storage. Control of pests in storage is a critical part of maintaining product safety, so include a detailed description of your pest control plan.

Transportation

Note how crops are being transported to markets and strategies to avoid risk of contamination during movement.

Understanding Audits

Each year, you should perform a self-audit where your farm food safety plan is reviewed to be sure it still describes your operation. Audits are a tool to assess on-farm food safety activities, facilities, and to confirm practices and procedures are in place to minimize contamination of fresh produce crops. These audits can be performed by the operator or someone from off the farm to confirm compliance with the plan. Your urban farm – particularly in the beginning – may be exempt from certain regulatory requirements, like the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). As your operation grows and sales increase, you may be subject to specific rules. As an example, when expanding into certain wholesale markets, buyers may require third-party GAP audits.

Food Safety Resources for Urban Farms

[Cultivate Kentucky](#) is a program through the University of Kentucky that has templates, checklists and logs available free to produce growers. Program personnel will also provide technical assistance in writing farm food safety plans and advising on food safety upgrades.

Your local Cooperative Extension Service Office is another resource available to help you with producing food crops in urban areas. [Find your local county office here.](#)

[Produce Best Practices Training \(PBPT\)](#) is a Kentucky-specific food safety training offered through local county extension offices. The training is voluntary and required for sampling certificates.

All Kentucky produce growers are required to complete the Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) [Produce Farm Inventory Survey](#). This survey will help determine if your farming operation is required to comply with the [Food Safety Modernization Act Produce Safety Rule \(FSMA PSR\)](#) or if it is exempt. KDA offers produce safety technical assistance and guidance, regardless of a farm's exemption status.

Photo Credits: Dr. Cindy Finneseth and University of Kentucky Marketing and Agricultural Communications.

References/Resources:

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