

Keeping Produce Safe During the Harvest Season

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Produce safety is a topic all growers need to be concerned about. As we move into the busy peak of the harvest season here in Virginia, keep in mind two primary areas of safety concern:

1. Use of registered pesticides only, and abiding by re-entry and harvest interval restrictions for pesticides.
2. Bacterial contamination of produce.

Use of a non-registered pesticide (insecticides, fungicides, herbicides) can sometimes be a mistake on the part of the applicator, a lack of understanding of what the label says, or outright disregard for label statements (often out of desperation to control a certain pest). One common means of misapplication occurs when multiple formulations of an active ingredient are available, but not all the formulations are labeled for the same crops. Growers mistakenly apply a related material, thinking "it is essentially the same stuff" (and/or it is cheaper). But keep in mind that it is still as much a violation of federal law to apply a similar but unregistered material on a crop, as it is a totally unrelated, unregistered material. Though active ingredients may be the same, the formulation itself may be different (EC vs. WP), or there may be different additives (inerts, adjuvants etc.) that could potentially harm the crop and/or leave lasting residues.

Pesticide safety is important for your workers in the field (re-entry intervals), for the future consumers of your produce (harvest intervals), and ultimately for your operations liability sake. Your key to knowing these two important numbers will be found on the label of the product(s) you are using. It will always be the ultimate authority and last word as to when you can get in the field, and how soon you can harvest after spraying. Though many printed references are very accurate (including our VT Extension publications), the world of regulated/registered pesticides is constantly changing, and printed references soon become out-dated as labels change and new products/formulations are developed. Bottom-line, always take time to read the label before applying chemicals. It can save you time and money and make things safer for you, your workers and consumers.

The second area of produce safety is related to both safe growing, and the handling of produce to prevent bacterial contamination. Currently there is a nationwide effort to reduce food safety risks through educational programs such as GAPs (Good Agricultural Practices). Virginia Tech Cooperative Extension introduced this program last winter at grower meetings around the state, and we hope to develop more in-depth programs in the future.

The GAPs program is a good common sense Extension approach to raising, harvesting, packing and shipping produce safely. Though there are many considerations to development of a GAPs program on the farm, but it can be condensed into a few key points:

In the field, manure management is a critical issue. For harvest and packing, clean hands, clean harvest bins, dip sanitation of produce (when warranted), and clean packing boxes are primary concerns. Clean facilities include clean restrooms, and the areas where produce is handled; the sorting and packing lines, coolers and transportation rigs. Continuous sanitation procedures and temperature monitoring are needed to ensure safety of produce as it goes through the handling process. From a grower liability standpoint, it is important to keep good records and document actions taken to keep things clean.

As the season gets busy, take time to keep up with food safety on the farm. Though it may have been a long day with harvest, packing and market delivery, it is worth the added effort to remain vigilant to problems, and take practical measures each day to ensure a clean product. Keep it safe this season!

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