

Urban Ag Food Safety

A “cheat sheet” to remember best practices for urban ag food safety, including the difference between FSMA and GAPs certification, basic considerations for urban farms and opportunities to expand your knowledge and skills.

Photo by Caitlin Tucker

Why should I care about food safety?

1. **We don't want people to get sick.** Certain populations are more at risk to foodborne illness such as older adults, younger children, pregnant people and people with weakened immune systems.
2. **It's bad for business.** Food illness outbreaks and recalls of produce may damage consumer confidence and loyalty.
3. **It's the law.** Federal and state laws say we must follow food safety procedures on the farm: Food Safety Modernization Act and NYS Agriculture and Markets Article 17.
4. **Markets may require food safety certification.** In some cases, growers may be legally exempt from regulation but find certain markets and programs require food safety certification (ex. NYS Grown and Certified).
5. **There are other benefits too.** Following food safety procedures can increase efficiency, improve produce quality, reduce the spread of plant diseases through regular cleaning and sanitization of tools, harvest bins, and equipment, and improve wildlife management.

Regulation and Marketing Landscape

When thinking about selling produce in New York State, growers will navigate mandated federal and state food safety regulations and voluntary market-driven certifications.

What's the difference between FSMA and GAPs Certification?

Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)

FSMA is **regulated by the FDA (required by law)** and requires farms to comply with specific food safety practices on farms that are subject to the regulation. Farm **inspections** and **mandatory training** are a part of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule. Not all growers are covered by FSMA and some growers may qualify for an exemption—whether you are covered or qualified for an exemption is based on your sales.

If your farm business is excluded or Qualified Exempt from regulations, you are still required to keep sales records each season to prove the operation does fall under either category.

vs

Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) Certification

3rd Party Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) Certification is a **buyer-imposed program** (voluntary). There are different “brands” of GAPs (ex. Primus GAPs, USDA Harmonized GAPs). Certification requires an **audit** and **farm food safety plan**.

BROOKLYN GRANGE



Photo from Brooklyn Grange

A case in point of market-driven certification...

Brooklyn Grange needed to obtain GAPs certification to sell the hot peppers for their hot sauce to Wegmans. After reaching out to the Urban Ag Harvest NY team for assistance, they were able to obtain GAPs certification along with funding from [NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets GAPs reimbursement program](#). In addition to assistance with GAPs, the Harvest NY team directed them to the Cornell Food Venture Center to obtain a scheduled process and ensure their hot sauce met safety guidelines as a shelf stable product.

Guidance on Selling Produce at Farmers Market from New York State Agriculture and Markets

- A license is not required to sell fruits or vegetables that have been grown and harvested. Produce must be stored under sanitary conditions, having removed excess dirt. Produce may **NOT** be cut or processed at farmers' markets except as part of a Department of Health permitted food service operation.
- Food must be labeled according to [New York State food labeling requirements](#). In brief, food must be labeled with common name of the food or product, name and address of farm or manufacturer, net quantity of contents, and ingredient statement.
- Selling processed food (cooking, baking, heating, drying, mixing, freezing, manufacturing) requires a 20-C license or exemption.

Urban Ag Food Safety Considerations

Considering food safety refers to taking active steps to minimize risk of microbial, physical and chemical contamination of food. Common sources of contamination in an urban agriculture context include people, water, soil amendments, pests, and equipment.



PEOPLE

People

- Consider physical barriers like fences to keep the public away from sensitive areas like the wash/pack station and crop fields.
- Post the farm's visitor policy, which can protect against unwanted visitors/illegal activity on the urban farm.
- Ensure both workers and the public are following good hygiene practices like handwashing. Examples of [low-cost hand washing set-ups can be found on UVM's website](#).
- Regularly scout for broken glass or needles in aisles or on raised beds.



WATER

Water

- Treat rain barrels as surface water, meaning it has the greatest risk of contamination and can pose a serious food safety risk if used as irrigation of fresh crops on the farm. When possible, use municipal water for crop irrigation.
- Cover rain barrels to prevent animal intrusion.



Soil Amendments

- Reduce the risk of contamination of heavy metals by mulching and keeping dust to a minimum (follow [Cornell's SoilNOW 10 Best Practices for Healthy Gardening](#)).
- Test your soil and compost and reduce your risk of contamination by growing in raised beds using imported clean soil.
- Consider proximity of unfinished compost piles to crop fields in case of runoff after extreme weather events (Figure 1).



Pests

- Rats are often the greatest food safety pests on urban farms. NYC Department of Health offers an online [Rat Academy training for Community Gardens](#). Cornell IPM offers additional resources for [managing mice and rats](#).
- Regularly scout for dog and cat feces; make sure to reinforce pet and leash policies if you encounter contamination in your garden beds.
- If bee hives are close by, it can be helpful to post a “bees at work” sign to protect workers and visitors.
- Keep chicken coops and chickens away from garden beds with fresh produce. A buffer may be necessary to keep chickens from entering planting areas.
- Traps can be effective in managing animal pests such as groundhogs (Figure 2).



Equipment

- Replace wood surfaces with stainless steel for easier cleaning and sanitizing in the wash/pack area. Besides stainless steel, any water-resistant high gloss surface could work, or a wire shelf or PVC frame covered with folded over plastic/vinyl snow fencing held on with cable ties.
- Keep harvest bins off the ground. Placing them on a pallet (Figure 3) is a simple way to keep them off the ground.



Figure 1. Consider the proximity of compost piles to fresh produce as runoff can occur during rain events. Photo by Yolanda Gonzalez



Figure 2. Trapping can be an effective way to manage certain animal pests such as groundhogs. Photo by Lori Koenick



Figure 3. Best practices for food safety include keeping harvest bins off the ground; placing them on a pallet is a simple way to do this. Photo by Lori Koenick

Resources

- [NYC Rat Academy Trainings](#)
- [New York Soil Health: Navigating Lead Soil Testing](#)
- [New York Urban Farms Sustainable Pest Management Fact Sheet Series](#)
- [Great Lakes Urban IPM working group resources](#)
- [Food Safety Considerations for Agriculture within Urban Spaces](#), FAO UN
- [Urban Agriculture - Food Safety, Handling, and Processing](#), UC ANR
- [Urban Agriculture Manual - Food Safety](#), University of Wisconsin
- [Food Safety at Farmers' Markets, Guidance on Sanitary Regulations for New York State Farmers' Markets Vendors](#), New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets
- [New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets: Division of Food Safety and Inspection units](#)



Photo by RJ Anderson

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