

A Bountiful Garden is a Food Safe Garden

We have entered the prime of planting season: all conditions are right for vegetable plants to be put in the ground. One issue that is often overlooked when preparing for spring or fall gardens is food safety.

Produce can become contaminated and cause foodborne illness, whether it's locally grown or grown thousands of miles from home.

Keeping food safe doesn't have to be a daunting task, however. It means keeping harmful bacteria, viruses, and parasites from contaminating our home-grown produce. Follow these practical planning tips for food safe produce all season long.

When choosing a site for your garden, pay close attention to possible sources of contamination. These could include things like streets, garbage, or even spots frequented by pets or animals. Choosing a raised bed garden option allows better control over whether the soil is safe for growing edible crops. Be sure to purchase non-toxic materials when building raised beds, however, like untreated woods that are non-leaching.

Consider fencing your garden site to protect from pets or wild animals. Consider using chicken wire to cover seedlings or vegetable beds to deter animals, like cats, from defecating in the soil, making the soil dangerous if consumed by humans. If there are signs of animal waste, do not use produce from that area of the garden.

"The safest sources of water used for gardening are those from municipal water supplies or wells that are tested to ensure water quality" states Judy Harrison, UGA food safety specialist.

While working in your vegetable garden, be sure to wash hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm running water before and after working with produce. If you've been sick, wait 24 hours without symptoms before returning to your garden work.

Work with clean containers, tools, and other materials and take care to sanitize them when harvesting your fresh fruits and vegetables.

You can make an inexpensive sanitizing solution by mixing 1 tablespoon of unscented chlorine bleach with 1 gallon of water. This can be used on equipment or containers after washing. Soak your items for at least one minute and allow them to air dry. Be sure to make a fresh batch of sanitizer each day.

To prevent cross-contamination, which is when harmful microorganisms travel from one surface to another surface, line baskets with clean paper towels.

Finally, when your produce is ready to be made into a delicious dish, rinse all fruits and vegetables well in water that is safe to drink before using them. If the produce has a firm skin, it can be scrubbed with a clean vegetable brush.

It is best to store produce between 35-40 degrees Fahrenheit. Produce such as tomatoes can be stored at room temperature until ripe. However, keep produce away from raw meats to prevent cross-contamination.

Following these simple guidelines will help you and your family enjoy a bountiful season of a locally-grown and safe harvest.

Sources: UGA Extension, University of Maryland Extension