FAQ about COVID-19 for fruit and vegetable farms, gardens, and markets

Version 2, 3/19/2021

These Frequently Asked Questions are intended to provide guidance and information about COVID-19 to produce farms, community gardens, farmers' markets and other agricultural producers. For a more general overview of COVID-19 FAQs, please see the Centers for Disease Control FAQ page. This page is meant to accompany UMN Extension COVID-19 response templates for fruit and vegetable farms and community gardens.

Disclaimer: The information in this document is current as of 3/19/21. New research and information related to SARS-Co-V-2 are coming out regularly, and this FAQ will be updated to reflect changes.

1. What are the most important steps farmers can take to minimize the spread of COVID-19 on farms?

SARS-Co-V-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19 illness) is a respiratory virus that spreads primarily through droplets during person-to-person contact. According to guidance from the CDC and other public health organizations, the most important actions you can take to minimize the spread of the disease are the following.

1. **Physical distancing** - Maintain at least 6 feet between all staff, volunteers and visitors to minimize person-to-person spread of the virus.
2. **Wear a mask** - Continue to wear a well-fitted mask in public to prevent the spread of the virus to those around you, even if you are fully vaccinated. The CDC recommends that masks have 2 or 3 layers for maximum effectiveness.
3. **Don't work if you are sick** - Know the symptoms like fever, cough, body aches, shortness of breath (see CDC), and do not come to the farm if you have any of these symptoms.
4. **Handwashing** - Wash your hands before work and often while you work for at least 20 seconds.
5. **Use good personal hygiene** - Sneeze into a tissue - cover your cough, and wash your hands after sneezing or coughing.
6. **Clean and sanitize** the high-touch areas on the farm including tools and surfaces at least daily to minimize the spread via surfaces.

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Preparedness Plans: All critical and non-critical businesses, including farms and farmers' markets, are required to have a COVID-19 preparedness plan. A template from the Department of Labor and Industry is available, along with the farm-specific template and community garden template available from the University of Minnesota.

2. When should farmers or gardeners wear masks?

The CDC and the Minnesota Department of Health continue to recommend that all Americans wear cloth masks in public, even persons who have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. It is not currently known how effective vaccines are against asymptomatic spread, that is, people might be able to spread the disease even when they are fully vaccinated. Wearing a mask helps prevent transmission by blocking droplets when we speak, sneeze, cough or breathe. The CDC recommendations indicate a mask with 2 or 3 layers is best to prevent transmission.

One risk of wearing a mask is that they cause discomfort, especially if a person is working hard and sweating. This may cause the wearer to readjust, and in the process of doing so touch their face. Be careful to not touch your face when wearing a mask.

A second risk when wearing a mask is that masks may provide a false sense of protection, allowing people to slip-up on other precautions such as physical distancing. Masks made from fabric do not offer the same level of protection as a NIOSH certified N95 respirator. Take care to maintain physical distance while wearing the mask.

Based on these risks, it may not be necessary to wear a mask at all times on the farm/garden, such as while doing fieldwork alone. Consider situations where "community-based transmission" may be more likely, such as working in a more confined pack shed, or interacting with customers on the farm or at markets.

If using a mask, wash your hands before putting it on and taking it off. Wash the masks daily if they are made of washable material (not disposable). Homemade/fabric face coverings should be washed regularly using normal laundry detergent and the warmest water setting, if possible.

3. What steps should we take if a worker or gardener becomes sick with COVID-19?

Sick employees and volunteers should not come to work. The CDC recommends ensuring that all sick employees stay home and self-quarantine. According to the CDC a person can discontinue self-quarantine the following have been achieved:

- *10 days since symptoms first appeared and*
- *24 hours with no fever without the use of fever-reducing medications and*
- *Other symptoms of COVID-19 are improving*

You are not required to report sick employees, but the Minnesota Department of Health is available to answer questions and help you troubleshoot: MDH at 651-201-5414. Healthy employees are allowed to continue working, as long as you have safety measures in place to reduce the likelihood of transmission.

If anyone on the farm or garden gets sick, the farm or garden manager should work with the whole farm crew to identify potential risks to other employees or volunteers. Try to identify whether any crew members have been in close contact with the sick person, and ask all crew members to take extra precaution and monitor themselves closely for signs of illness. Encourage employees and volunteers to get tested if they have been in close contact with a sick employee or person.

- Minnesota's testing locations are listed here.
- See the CDC's guidance on reducing transmission between employees for a comprehensive review of recommendations.
- Cornell's Institute for Food Safety has developed a helpful decision-making flow chart and Standard Operating Procedures template on this topic.
- Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry developed the guidance document COVID-19 Preparedness Plan Guidance: Requirements for Agriculture (updated 2/12/21)

4. Do we still need to promote handwashing?

Handwashing is a critical step to reduce the transmission of the virus and other illnesses on the farm and among your crew and visitors. Employees, volunteers, and visitors should wash their hands before harvesting or washing produce, after sneezing or coughing, after using the restroom, after eating and before putting on gloves. Make handwashing easy by putting hand washing stands at key locations around the farm, such as in the field, near restrooms and near packing facilities. Make sure that you are monitoring stations to ensure they are well stocked with soap, paper towels, potable water and a garbage can. Hang signs to remind people to wash their hands well.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizer is effective against the virus, but it is not a substitute for handwashing, since it is not effective at killing viruses when hands are dirty. You can use sanitizer if you choose to when hand washing is not possible, such as when your delivery driver is making deliveries and on the road, but during normal farm and garden operations hand sanitizer should not be a replacement for handwashing as it will not be effective if hands are soiled.

The handwashing stand can be a table or the back of a pick-up or van with a water container with a spigot (e.g. an Aqua-Tainer or a cooler). The water container should have a continuous-flow valve, meaning it flows down without needing to be pressed, allowing you

to rub your hands together while being washed. In a community garden, if you have a tool shed, you can store these materials in the toolshed overnight and assign someone to refill the water container each morning. If you do not have a toolshed, some garden leaders have suggested partnering with a neighbor, who could potentially keep the water container overnight if you are worried about theft.

Video: How to build a hand washing station for $20

Fact sheet version

5. Can COVID-19 be spread on food or food packaging?

The USDA and FDA released a joint statement on 2/18/21 to underscore that there is no currently known transmission risk of COVID-19 through food or food packaging. The SARS-CoV-2 is a respiratory virus, and the primary transmission route is person-to-person contact via droplets that are expelled when an infected person coughs, sneezes or breathes in the air near another person. That is not to say that food or food packaging could *never* transmit the virus, but it is not the primary or most likely way that someone would contract the virus.

6. What do we know about how long the virus remains on surfaces? Can we use waxed cardboard boxes?

Research published in the New England Journal of Medicine finds that in laboratory conditions, SARS-CoV-2 can persist on surfaces like plastic and metal for up to 3 days, cardboard for up to 24 hours, and in the air for up to 3 hours. Remember that these are in controlled conditions, and in a typical environment the virus most likely degrades within a few hours. Basic cleaning and sanitizing routines will likely be sufficient to inactivate the virus, should it be on your farm or on your totes, tools or other surfaces.

Waxed cardboard boxes will be more challenging to sanitize compared to non-porous options such as plastic. Some farms are using plastic liners in their waxed boxes this year to reduce the touching of produce after it is packed. Another option is to leave boxes untouched for a number of days after you get them back in case the virus is present on the surface. Remember though, dirty boxes can carry other foodborne pathogens like *E. coli* and *Salmonella* from cross-contamination that occurs when they are out of your control. Discard boxes when they get too soiled or if they were in contact with someone with a known COVID-19 diagnosis.

7. What sanitizers are approved to inactivate the virus that causes COVID-19 on surfaces?

The EPA "List N" is the list of disinfectants that are approved for use because they are effective against SARS CoV-2 or harder to kill organisms. The best way to use this tool is to

search the EPA registration number on a label since products go by many names in the marketplace.

In general, use the **hard surface sanitizing rate** on the label for your everyday preventative sanitizing schedule for surfaces, tools and "high-touch" surfaces. Use the **disinfectant rate** on the label if you have a confirmed COVID-19 case on the farm or in the garden. This is often a higher rate and longer wet contact time. Some options for sanitizing and disinfecting hard surfaces for coronavirus include:

- Household bleach: Ultra Clorox Regular Brand bleach (6.0% sodium hypochlorite product) is approved for use against the virus. The hard surface sanitizing rate is 200 ppm, or about 1 T per gallon. The CDC disinfection recommendations state that bleach should be mixed at a rate of 5 T per gallon, or 1000 ppm if there is a known COVID-19 case on the farm.

- VigorOx SP-15: (15.0% peroxyacetic acid and 10.0% hydrogen peroxide product) is approved for use against the virus and OMRI-approved for organically certified operations. The label says that the surface sanitizing rate is 1 oz. per 16 gallon of water (85 ppm of PAA) with a contact time of 1 minute.

- Sanidate 5.0: Sanidate 5.0 (5.3% peroxyacetic acid and 23.0% hydrogen peroxide product) is a OMRI-approved disinfectant product made by BioSafe Systems. Sanidate 5.0 is listed on the EPA's List N. Sanidate 5.0 has been tested and shown to be effective against human coronaviruses at a rate of 1 Fl oz per gallon, or about 400-450 ppm with a 10 minute wet contact time.

8. What surfaces should we clean and sanitize to minimize the spread of coronavirus on the farm?

Your farm might already have cleaning and sanitizing routines for food contact surfaces. Sanitizing for COVID-19 might not be significantly different from those current procedures, with the addition of extra attention to "high-touch" surfaces that many people touch daily. Use the hard surface sanitizing rate of your disinfectant on these "high-touch" surfaces at least daily. Some of these "high-touch" surfaces on the farm or in the garden might include:

- *Field: vehicle door handles, steering wheels, stick shifts, PTO handles, shared tools*
- *Pack shed: dolly handles, cooler handles, door handles, light switches, scale buttons*
- *Greenhouse: watering wand, germination chamber handles, door handles, vent openers*
- *Office: keyboard, mouse, iPad, phones, chair armrests*
- *Restrooms: toilet handles and seats, faucet handles, door handles*
- *Tools and equipment: Sorting tables, harvest totes and buckets, scales, clippers, knives*
- *Other: buttons, pads and touch screens used by staff or volunteers*

Remember: You cannot sanitize a dirty surface! Clean a surface well *before* you apply the sanitizer if the surface has any visible soil. Develop a cleaning and sanitizing SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) that describes how you clean and then sanitize surfaces so that employees know the steps to take. An SOP is, in essence, detailed instructions that describe how you make the sanitizing solution and do the cleaning. Keep a log sheet documenting that your processes have been completed so you have a record of your actions.

9. Are gloves required?

If you want to wear gloves you can, but they are not required and are not a replacement for proper handwashing. Change disposable gloves if they become contaminated or torn, and between tasks. Wash reusable gloves after each day. Gloves can spread contamination just as well as a hand can, and may also provide a false sense of protection that could cause the wearer to slip up on other precautions such as hand washing and regular change-out. If a worker who is handling produce chooses to wear disposable gloves, make certain that they know to wash hands well before putting them on and that they must change them when they become soiled, between tasks or any time they have reason to think the glove might have become contaminated.

10. Do I qualify for the Paycheck Protection Program? Is it worth applying?

The Paycheck Protection Program, part of the CARES Act that Congress passed in response to COVID-19, is a loan program primarily intended for small businesses, including farms, to be able to fund employee payroll if they have been impacted by the crisis. The program has been refunded and extended numerous times since last year. The current deadline to apply is March 31, 2021. Check with the lender where you do business to see if you qualify and if funds are available. The loan will be converted to a grant (forgiven) if you use at least 60% of the funds to pay employees within 8 to 24 weeks of receiving the loan, and the other 40% are used for approved business expenses.

For more information on the Payroll Protection Program, see Farmers Legal Action Group, University of Minnesota Extension, or the Small Business Administration.

11. What other assistance programs might be available to our farm?

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act passed by Congress in March 2020 applies to all businesses with fewer than 500 employees, including farmers. While some aspects of the law's paid sick leave and family leave have expired, employers can still access tax credits to provide their employees paid emergency family and medical leave as well as paid sick leave. Full-time employees automatically are eligible for 80 hours of paid sick leave, paid at ⅔ of normal wages, while employees who have been employed for 30 days or more are eligible for up to 10 weeks of expanded family medical leave at ⅔ regular rate

of pay under certain conditions. Cost for providing the leave is offset by a refundable credit against the employer's share of payroll taxes (Social Security and Medicare) taxes, even if it exceeds the employer's tax liability.

The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program offers expanded unemployment benefits to farmers and farmworkers. It may provide unemployment compensation if a farm shuts down and owners or employees are unable to report to work. Farmers or farm workers who must stay home to take care of family members may also qualify for benefits under PUA. Unemployment benefits vary by state, check with your state's unemployment office to learn how to apply.

Other federal programs include the Economic Injury Disaster Loan and Coronavirus Food Assistance Program. State and local entities also have COVID-19 relief available; these programs are administered through agencies such as the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). While some program's deadlines have already passed, such as Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 1 & 2 and some MDA grants, additional federal resources from the American Recovery Plan Act are expected to be disbursed through new and existing programs in the coming months.

For a comprehensive overview of COVID-19 assistance programs, see the Farmers' Legal Action Group Farmers' Guide to COVID-19 Relief.

Do you have additional questions you'd like us to add to this document? Please reach out to Annalisa Hultberg (hultb006@umn.edu) or Natalie Hoidal (hoida016@umn.edu). This document will be updated as more information becomes available.