

## **GAPS: COMMON SENSE FOR FRESH PRODUCE GROWERS**

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Over the past several years, when and where we can, cooperative extension has introduced the GAPs (Good Agricultural Practices) program to fresh produce growers across the state. In particular the message has been directed to our wholesale growers who sell to brokers and commercial chain stores. GAPs is however a smart, practical and common sense concept that every produce grower, including direct marketers, should be incorporating into their operation.

The origin of the GAPs program goes back to the Food Safety Act of the 1990's initiated by the Clinton administration. Through collaborative federal USDA grants, Virginia Tech and many other universities across the country are working together to develop and implement standardized GAPs training programs for fresh produce growers.

Though we have many laws as related to safe application of pesticides to crops, there is little on the books when it comes to safe production and handling of fresh produce to minimize bacterial contamination. Across the country, thousands are sickened annually by various types of food contamination or poisoning, with the very young, old or immune compromised at special risk. Fresh produce can be a significant source of this contamination, with outbreaks occurring anywhere in the "farm-to-fork" chain. GAPs is a method to "fill the gap" in addressing food safety issues for the fresh produce grower.

For the uninitiated- what is involved in GAPs? The focus of GAPs is to ensure the safety of fresh produce as related to microbial contamination. It utilizes a HACCP-like approach with an overall look at a growers' operation- from field to packinghouse, to identify potential contamination sources. It also includes lot identification and traceback for the marketing chain, and addresses safe transportation of product. It is a step-wise method of assessment with a comprehensive approach.

HACCP is short for "hazard analysis critical control points". The HACCP method is used extensively in the food processing industry to ensure safe products of every kind on grocery shelves. With GAPs, the entire farming operation is broken down into management areas and scrutinized for potential bacterial contamination, and control points are identified. For example, water use in the field and packinghouse, and the proximity to animal operations and use of manures are considered important contamination control areas. As would be expected, worker sanitation and handling/packing of produce are key points for control of contamination. Good record keeping, and documentation of efforts is critical, as well as development of written standard operating procedures (SOP's) specific to food safety. Growers are expected to train workers about sanitation and safe procedures, and to document that training.

Food safety is an issue that is catching the attention of industry. Not only is product liability a real concern to grocers, the threat of domestic terrorism and attacks on our food delivery system is also of primary concern to government and homeland security. Our fresh produce marketing system is particularly vulnerable. As a part of the Bioterrorism Act of 2002, commercial growers who pack and ship are now required to register their packing operations with the FDA. For more info visit: <http://www.fda.gov/oc/bioterrorism/bioact.html>.

Also in September of this year, the "Country of Origin Labeling" law will be implemented for commercial shippers. At this point, GAPs is a voluntary program driven by industry, and current implementation affects only commercial packers. Eventually all produce growers may some day be affected by new laws addressing food safety. The FDA registration of growers who pack and ship is perhaps an early indicator of things to come.

As mentioned, GAPs is industry versus regulatory driven. In the produce business the buzz words growers are starting to hear are "third-party inspections". That is, buyers will not buy product from a commercial producer unless the farm has undergone an independent (and usually annual) inspection for GAPs compliance, and has been certified as a safe operation. Keep in mind, not all buyers are looking for GAPs certification per se, as some buyers have their own standards (and some none at all). It is after all their choice as buyers to buy from who they choose. In times of "short" produce availability, conditions may be lifted. From a buyer's standpoint, liability and product traceback is their greatest concern. It has been reported that GAPs requirements have been used by buyers to "weed out" smaller, less dependable and less traceable producers in favor of larger operations- who can afford third party inspections and deliver consistent quantity and quality.

From the grower's perspective, it is a new hoop to jump through, a learning, time and dollar commitment to implement GAPs, and it means a considerable expense to pay for third-party inspection. Certification will overcome a new hurdle to marketing with some outlets, and being GAPs compliant also becomes a strong marketing tool itself. This is especially true when produce is "long" and buyers have many suppliers to choose from. The good news is that many state departments of agriculture, including ours, are initiating on-farm inspection programs at a fraction of the cost of private firms. The USDA posts names of state certified operations on a nationwide website, an aspect of enhanced marketing for GAPs certified farms. The bad news is that implementation of GAPs and passing a farm "audit" can be a steep learning curve. Few pass an audit the first time, meaning they will have to pay for it again until they do. A key goal for our GAPs extension effort in the coming years will be to provide training to help growers pass on-farm audits.

Ultimately GAPs is a good common sense program to implement, whether certification is an end or not, regardless of size of farm, products grown or marketing outlet. For the conscientious, it is the right thing to do for consumers of your fresh produce, and it becomes a good marketing and promotional tool in any setting. If you are interested in learning more about GAPs, contact your local cooperative extension office, or visit a GAPs website: <http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/>, and <http://ucgaps.ucdavis.edu/>. For information about GAPs official certification on your farm, contact Mr. Tom Smith, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services at 804-786-3548 . If you are interested in hosting a GAPs training session in your region, or have specific questions related to implementation, contact myself at 540-231-1432 or [abratsch@vt.edu](mailto:abratsch@vt.edu) or Dr. Rob Williams, Dept. of Food Science and Technology at 540-231-4106 [rcwillia@vt.edu](mailto:rcwillia@vt.edu).

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