



Maine Vegetable and Small Fruit Growers Association

Spring 2020

President's Message –

This is already shaping up to be an interesting year, in different ways than any of us have had to deal with before. Farm stand sales are reported by everyone to be at nearly summer levels right now, and those of us who didn't have farm stands before are finding that it's an incredibly easy time to get one going. All the farmers and small business owners who I've talked to are saying the same thing, "where have these people been all these years!" Hopefully this holds out through the summer and becomes the new shopping trend going forward.

Our friends who sell commercial lowbush blueberries, potatoes, and dairy are not faring so well. It seems to come down to a lack of processing capacity for consumer sized packages of product. Lots of milk goes out in those 5-gallon plastic bags for food service that you may remember from the college cafeteria, and there just isn't enough time or plastic bottles to push the milk through in grocery store sizes. Ditto the chip and French fry stock that the potato growers have.

If you do have a farm stand and would like to carry frozen blueberries, you can contact Eric Venturini, Executive Director of the Maine Blueberry Commission at: eric.venturini@maine.edu and he can put you in touch with some growers. We have had a surprisingly level of interest in five-pound boxes of frozen blueberries at our stand. If you want to get some Aroostook County potatoes before yours are ready, you can email the Maine Potato Board at: mainepotatoes@mainepotatoes.com to find a potato grower with product to move. It generally costs \$100 to get a pallet shipped down from the County. Or, Green Thumb Farm has some here in southern Maine – info@greenthumbfarms.com. And of course, get in touch with your usual supply chains to see what anyone has left over to make sure your stand is as full as possible because people just can't get enough local right now.

In order to support all our farm stand farmers, our June twilight meeting will be a tour of Blackie's Farm Stand in Auburn. Details are below.

I have been in touch with the Maine Department of Ag (DACF) and Extension to encourage them to work on rules for pick your own, and they will be coming out soon. I also spoke with DACF about the onerous "guidance" provided by Maine DOL for what happens if an employee gets sick. The DOL expected us to provide "separate lodging" for anyone with any symptoms, which is impossible for some farms. According to Nancy McBrady, Director of the Ag Bureau, what DOL put out is simply guidance and can be ignored. I think workers who live on-farm getting sick is the big worry, and we will each have to figure that out if it happens.

Good luck to everyone this season,
Lisa

MVSFGA Briefs

Bumper Stickers

The MVSFGA has had bumper stickers to advertise and bring people's attention to buying local produce. The bumper stickers come in three different designs and will help to enhance and highlight the importance of local farms. These may be purchased for a \$1 each which includes shipping and handling. To obtain one of these send a check and your address to Bill Jordan Jr., 21 Wells Road, Cape Elizabeth, Maine 04107. Specify which ones and how many you would like.

Bumper Sticker #1 "Know Your Food"



Bumper Sticker #2 "Maine Famers"



Bumper Sticker #3 "Buy Local"



Some Farm Stands Opening Early

A number of farm stands around Maine have opened early this spring and have been pleasantly surprised at how responsive the public has been to buying local. Some have reported sales having doubled over last year with an increase in local products. If you have not considered it, you might be pleasantly surprised by opening your stands and presenting your products a little earlier than in past years. Many people have renewed an interest in gardening at home which serves to help provide the public with taste of locally grown fresh produce.

H2A Workers

A number of farms are reporting a shortage or difficulty with getting H2A workers onto their farms. If you have, you are not alone. Many workers are having trouble getting into the USA because of the Covid virus. Homeland Security has announced the workers already here may stay longer than their Visas allow to help with the H2A shortage. Workers already here may also switch to other farms.

University of Maine Cooperative Extension Working with Maine Farmers Under COVID-19

Although COVID-19 restrictions are keeping University of Maine staff away from their offices, we are still available to help you with questions regarding fruit and vegetable production, pest management and marketing. You can phone, e-mail or text us, and we will get back to you as soon as possible. We plan to run our IPM scouting programs for strawberries, sweet corn and apples this year, although how we interact with growers in the field, and the number of sites we monitor may have to change if we are still under travel and social distancing restrictions. The strawberry, sweet corn and apple IPM newsletters will continue to be sent out, although we may be limited in sending these via surface mail, so if you haven't yet signed up for the email version, please do! Cooperative Extension has posted a lot of helpful information on dealing with COVID-19 on your farm on its website at: <https://extension.umaine.edu/agriculture/>.

There is also a weekly virtual farm chat you can attend online via Zoom on Fridays at 10 a.m. This is an opportunity to share information with other farmers and hear from experts on various farming topics. More information and how to sign up is available on our website.

The plant disease and insect diagnostic lab are still functioning, albeit remotely at the present time. While they are not accepting mailed-in samples, you can e-mail photos of plant symptoms or insects to them for diagnosis.

They can be contacted at: extension.diagnosticlab@maine.edu.

Other good resources include the online versions of the New England Production Guides:

New England Small Fruit Management Guide: <https://ag.umass.edu/fruit/ne-small-fruit-management-guide>.

New England Vegetable Management Guide: <https://nevegetable.org/>.

New England Tree Fruit Management Guide: <https://netreefruit.org/>

Contact:

David Handley, Vegetable & Small Fruit Specialist

Email: david.handley@maine.edu

Office phone: 207-933-3703 (leave a message)

Cell phone: 207-485-0915 (if no answer send a text message)

Mark Hutton, Vegetable Specialist

Email: mark.hutton@maine.edu

Office phone: 207-933-3703 (leave a message)

Cell phone: 207-215-9536 (if no answer send a text message)

Early Summer Twilight Meeting

A twilight meeting is planned for Tuesday, June 16th. This meeting will focus on marketing and setting up displays. The meeting will begin at 6:30 which is a little later than usual due to the activities at the farm stand. The farm stand grows some of its own produce and purchases a great deal from local growers as well as buying through wholesalers. Below is a brief history and a little about the farm and stand which was recently purchased by Matt.

Blackie's Farm Fresh Produce was established 1986 by Normand "Blackie" Labbe. located at 966 Minot Avenue Auburn. They are a year round fruit and vegetable stand that sells retail and wholesale. The store offers wholesale delivery seven days a week to local schools, restaurants, farm stands and variety stores. The retail location is open seven days a week, every day except Christmas Day. Blackie always prided himself on work ethic and being open every day of the year.

This past November the store was sold to a former employee of 17 years, Matthew Manson and his wife Samantha. He had been working the store and the farm for many years and mentored by Blackie. Matt is continuing to farm on the Labbe's farm leasing the land and equipment from the family. The farm is a 30 acre vegetable farm located in Minot. A variety of seasonal produce is grown. These includes but not limited to sweet corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, summer and winter squash, melons, peppers, cabbage and rhubarb. They also buy from many local farms.

Recently with the current situation of COVID 19 the retail location has seen a large increase in business. Folks are trying to avoid the large box and chain stores, and also many people are trying to support locally owned businesses. We have lost much of our wholesale business with schools and restaurants closing. We have made adjustments and are now offering curbside service that has really taken the place of much of the wholesale business, although we are continuing to deliver seven days a week to the places that are still working.

Maine Farm and Seafood Products Directory

The Maine Cooperative Extension has created a directory to help farms market their produce. It is an on-line directory and is located at <https://extension.umaine.edu/agriculture/farm-product-and-pickup-directory/>

Many Thanks to our Business Members:

Brookdale Farm	http://www.brookdalefruitfarm.com/
Deerbusters Deer Fence	https://www.deerbusters.com/
Harris Seeds	https://www.harriseseeds.com/
Nourse Farms	https://www.noursefarms.com/
Nutrien Ag Solutions	brain.mccleary@nutrien.com
Vermont Compost	https://www.vermontcompost.com/
Paris Farmer Union	timdonovan.pfu@gmail.com
Steve Goodwin Ag Consultant	goodberry@roadrunner.com
Northeast Ag Sales	pumpkinpaul1@aol.com
Seedway	lauchlin54@gmail.com

Basic Recommendations for Farmers Related to Coronavirus & COVID-19

By Chris Callahan, University of Vermont Cooperative Extension

The current COVID-19 pandemic is a common concern and many are wondering what they can and should do. The information here is intended to help guide the farming community.

COVID-19 is the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (“the novel coronavirus”). Symptoms include fever, cough, and shortness of breath, and may appear 2-14 days after exposure. While the majority of COVID-19 illnesses are mild, it can result in severe and fatal illness, particularly in the elderly and among those with severe underlying health conditions. Federal and State agencies are working hard to better understand the virus, how to control its spread, and how to treat those infected. One of the key things we can all do is to limit and slow the spread of COVID-19 to provide time for this understanding to develop and to not overwhelm the medical system. Much more information is available at the CDC Situational Summary page at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>.

What Should Growers Do?

1. **Stay Away from Produce if Sick** – If someone is sick, they should be nowhere near fruit and vegetables that others are going to eat. This is likely already part of your farm’s food safety plan and policies, but this is a good reminder to emphasize and enforce the policy. Make sure employees stay home if they feel sick and send them home if they develop symptoms at work. Consider posting signs asking customers not to shop at your farm stand if they have symptoms.
2. **Practice Social Distancing** – By putting a bit more space between you and others you can reduce your chances of getting ill. This might mean limiting or prohibiting farm visitors or reducing the number of off-farm meetings you attend in person. Avoid shaking hands and other physical contact. This also reduces the risk of your produce coming into contact with someone who is ill before it heads to market.
3. **Minimize the Number of Touches** – Consider changes in your policies and operations that minimize the number of times produce is touched by different people. This may include workers, distributors, and customers. More examples are provided below in the Q&A section.
4. **Wash Your Hands** – Reinforce the importance of washing hands well when arriving at work, when changing tasks (e.g. moving from office work to wash/pack), before and after eating, after using the bathroom, before putting on gloves when working with produce, and after contact with animals. Soap + water + 20 seconds or more are needed to scrub all surfaces of your hands and fingers thoroughly. Then, dispose of paper towels in a covered, lined trash container.
5. **Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Drying** – According to the FDA, there is no indication that this virus has spread via food. But, we know viruses (including SARS-CoV-2) survive and spread via hard surfaces. Farms handle produce using tools and equipment with surfaces. We also know that produce has surfaces. Viruses, in general, can be relatively long-lasting in the environment, and have the potential to be transferred via food or food contact surfaces. So, there’s no better time than the present to review, improve, and reinforce your standard operating procedures for cleaning, sanitizing, disinfecting, and drying any food contact surfaces, food handling equipment, bins, and tools. More info is provided below in the Q&A section. Remember, cleaning means using soap and water, sanitizing is using a product labeled for sanitizing, disinfecting typically involves higher concentrations of a product labeled for disinfection, and drying means allowing the surfaces to dry completely before use.
6. **Plan for Change** – Many produce farms are lean operations run by one or two managers and a minimal crew. Do you have a plan for if you become severely ill? How do things change if half your workforce is out sick? More business and labor planning guidance is available at the Cornell Agricultural Workforce Development site at <https://agworkforce.cals.cornell.edu/2020/03/12/novel-coronavirus-prevention-control-for-farms/>.

What Should Markets and Farmers Markets Do?

1. **Everything Above** – Growers, retail food market owners, and farmers market managers should do all the things above. Does your market have a hand washing station? More guidance for food safety is available from the FDA at <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/food-safety-and-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19> .
2. **Communicate with your Customers** – Consider reaching out to your customers and recommend they stay home if they are ill. Have you informed your customers about any changes in your hours or policies?
3. **Consider Alternative Delivery** – Some markets are taking this opportunity to launch pre-ordering and electronic payment options to enable social distancing at market. Some markets are moving to a drive-through pickup option. More examples are provided below in the Q&A section.

4. **Reinforce the Health Benefits of Fruits and Vegetables** – We’re fortunate to have so many growers who do a great job with storage crops and winter production. This means our community has access to fresh fruits and vegetables that are important to their immune systems at this time of need. Be sure to promote the nutritional value of your products! But, keep in mind that promotion of your products should be within reason. Avoid making overly broad or unsupported health claims. Fresh produce contains many minerals and nutrients important for immune health which may reduce the severity and duration of an illness. **Fun Fact:** Pound for pound, that storage cabbage in your cooler has as nearly as much vitamin C as oranges.

Questions and Answers

- **What is the difference between cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfection?** The CDC provides more detail on their cleaning website at <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/school/cleaning.htm>, but the take-homes are:
 - “**Cleaning** removes germs, dirt, and impurities from surfaces and objects...using soap (or detergent) and water to physically remove [them].”
 - “**Disinfecting** kills germs on surfaces or objects. Disinfecting works by using chemicals to kill germs on surfaces or objects. This process does not necessarily clean dirty surfaces or remove germs, but by killing germs on a surface after cleaning, it can further lower the risk of spreading infection.”
 - “**Sanitizing** lowers the number of germs on surfaces or objects to a safe level, as judged by public health standards or requirements.”
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- **What Should I Use for Disinfection and Sanitizing?** The EPA has provided a list of disinfectants for use against SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing COVID-19, at <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>. Very few of these products are common on the farm and may be hard to find. If you are currently using a sanitizer as part of a standard cleaning and sanitizing procedure for hard surfaces on your farm, continue doing so. Consider reviewing the label for that product and using it for disinfection of specific high-touch surfaces if applicable. You can also follow the CDC guidance and use a mixture of bleach and water (5 tbsps / gallon or 4 tsp / quart).
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- **Should I be disinfecting my produce?** As noted above, there is no indication that COVID-19 has spread via produce. The virus is thought to be spread mainly from person to person according to the CDC. For most farms the level of operational change and amount of disinfectant needed to disinfect produce is unrealistic.
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- **What about using gloves?** Gloves can provide a barrier between hands and produce preventing transmission of pathogens from hands to produce and from produce to hands. They aren’t a perfect solution, and require attention to detail when using according to Penn State Extension at <https://extension.psu.edu/best-practices-for-fresh-produce-food-safety#section-41>.
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- **What are farmers’ markets and CSAs doing?** Some farmers markets have changed the way they do business to implement some of the best practices listed above. The NY Farmers Market Federation has offered more food safety protocols for farmers markets: <http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/protocols/>
- - **Carrboro, NC Farmer’s Market Case Study**– NC State Extension has posted a summary of what the Carrboro Farmers’ Market has done. This has included communication with market customers, social distancing by rearranging the market layout, rounding prices for limited use of coins, running a “tab” for customers to minimize cash transactions, no samples, no tablecloths to ease sanitation, and the addition of a hand washing station among other things.

- **Minimize the Number of Touches (CSA)**– One CSA has decided to change how they distribute to an urban market. They have previously trucked larger bins of produce to a distribution site where customers would select their own produce to fill their share. They have decided to pack the shares to order at the farm prior to distribution to minimize the number of people touching the produce. Another alternative would be packing shares to order at the market.
- **Minimize the Number of Touches (Farmers’ Market)**– The Bennington Farmers’ Market has shifted to online ordering and pre-bagged orders from each farm that are combined into larger collective orders delivered to each customer via a drive-up system. The biggest decision was deciding that they’d actually continue to have the market. The new approach required the addition of an on-line ordering system (Google Forms for now), coordination among farms and some serious organization at the market. Orders are organized alphabetically, pickups are scheduled with a quarter of the alphabet every 30 minutes. People won’t get out of their cars.
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- **What are other farms doing?** Some farms have written and implemented specific response plans or taken other measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19. Two Farmers Farm in Scarborough, Maine have developed a detailed, yet agile farm plan available online at <https://workflowy.com/s/two-farmers-farm-cov/YKiHC2HZ2Jh6sBnr>.

What are other CSAs, markets, farmers and others doing? Send me an email at chris.callahan@uvm.edu, I’ll compile the results.

Lastly, any organizations in the Northeast are working hard to get the best information to farmers as quickly as possible. There is much we still do not understand about how the virus survives on surfaces. Be sure to check with your local extension offices and service providers to get the most up to date information as it is available.

This article first appeared on the UVM Extension website at <https://blog.uvm.edu/cwcallah/2020/03/18/considerations-for-fruit-and-vegetable-growers-related-to-coronavirus-covid-19/>. The UVM Extension Produce Safety Team is continuing to update the article online with new information.

MVSFGA

MVSFGA is an association of vegetable and small fruit growers dedicated to the promotion and advocacy of the vegetable and small fruit industry in Maine. MVSFGA supports research education, and promotion and political advocacy. The association has provided important testimony at legislative hearings on such issues as pesticide regulation, labor, IPM, farmland preservation and technology transfer.

MVSFGA members receive the annual New England Vegetable Production Guide, and the New England Small Fruit Production Guide. Members also receive the association newsletter. To become a member of the MVSFGA please write to: William Jordan Jr. Treasurer, 21 Wells Road, Cape Elizabeth, Maine 04107, email: whj30@aol.com

MVSFGA Directors are: Lisa Turner (President), Bill Bamford (vice-president), William Jordan (Treasurer), Tomi Chipman (secretary), Tom Stevenson, Justin Gray, Paul Peters, Mathew Matson, Pete Karonis, and Harold Grams.