



Food Safety in the Berry Patch

Pick-your-own berry operations are becoming increasingly popular, offering growers an additional market outlet and allowing folks of all ages to tour agricultural areas, experience life on the farm, and enjoy fresh, locally grown fruit.

Strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, and other small fruits are also full of vitamins, fiber, and compounds, such as anthocyanins and ellagic acid, that several studies, including some by Ohio State University researchers, have found to be powerful cancer-fighters.

In spite of their multiple benefits, fresh fruits and vegetables have been recently linked to several cases of foodborne illnesses involving dangerous bacteria and parasites.

When you and your family visit the berry patch next time for a fun u-pick experience, the last thing you want to do is end up picking your own dangerous germs instead. To make that experience a safe one, food safety experts with Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center recommend that you follow some basic hygiene and food-handling principles while at the farm, during the trip back home, and in your kitchen.

On the farm

1. It may sound simple, but washing your hands and making sure the little ones do the same thing is one of the most effective ways to prevent food contamination.

Wash your hands:

When

- Before picking fruit.
- After every visit to the bathroom.
- After a break or a meal.
- After hand-to-face contact (e.g., coughing, sneezing, blowing nose).
- After handling any materials other than the berries.

How

- Use proper hand-washing techniques.
- Wet hands, lather soap, and wash for 20 seconds (sing the song “Happy Birthday” twice).
- Scrub well (especially fingernails and knuckles); use fingernail brushes if available.
- Rinse.
- Dry hands and wrists with a paper towel.

If there is no water?

- Use hand wipes to remove soil.
- Use hand sanitizer.

2. Use bathroom facilities while in the u-pick operation.
3. Do not pick berries that have fallen on the ground.
4. Place picked berries into clean containers.
5. Do not bring pets to the farm.
6. Remain in the designated picking area.
7. Dispose of garbage in the trash bin provided.

After picking (during transportation)

When bringing the berries you picked home, it is important not to break the cold chain. Even though you may see un-refrigerated berries in the supermarket, fresh fruit has to be kept cold. Follow these tips:

- Bring a cooler with ice packs with you.
- Cool your berries as soon as possible.
- Do not drive around with un-refrigerated berries for more than two hours.

At home (preparation)

Many cases of foodborne illnesses result from mishandling food at home. The same applies to fresh fruit. Keep these points in mind upon returning from the berry patch:

- Wash berries thoroughly before storing them in the refrigerator.
- Always refrigerate berries.
- Prevent cross-contamination of berries (and other fresh produce that will not be cooked) from potentially contaminated foods such as raw ground beef.

Nutrition facts

Remember, berries are a great choice to meet the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables and maintain good overall health. For example, a cup of sliced fresh strawberries (one serving, 166 grams) has 50 calories, one gram of protein, 11.65 grams of carbohydrates, 3.81 grams of dietary fiber, 23.24 grams of calcium, 0.63 mg of iron, 16.60 mg of magnesium, 31.54 mg of phosphorus, 44.82 mg of potassium, 1.16 mg of selenium, 94.12 mg of vitamin C, 29.38 mcg of folate, and 44.82 IU of vitamin A.

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SEEDS, The OARDC Research Enhancement Competitive Grants Program, Research Update No. 32, "From Crop to Clinic: The Anti-Carcinogenic Power of Berries and the Development of the Berry Industry in Ohio," <http://www.oardc.ohio-state.edu/seeds/seed32.pdf> (accessed on June 27, 2007).

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