

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



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FARMERS' MARKETS, FARM STANDS, & CSAs Guidance Memo #5

Considerations for Fruit and Vegetable Growers Related to Coronavirus & COVID-19

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 fruit and vegetable farming community. If you have concerns or suggestions please contact the MDAR Produce Safety Team at Michael.Botelho@mass.gov or via phone at (508) 985-8751, or UMASS Agricultural Extension Vegetable Program at lmckeag@umass.edu or via phone at (413) 545-1051.

Background

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](#).

Foodborne Exposure to COVID-19 (As of 3/24/20)

Unlike foodborne gastrointestinal (GI) viruses like norovirus and hepatitis A that often make people ill through contaminated food, SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, is a virus that causes respiratory illness. Foodborne exposure to this virus is not known to be a route of transmission.

The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person. This includes between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet), and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads. Please visit <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/food-safety-and-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19> for further information on COVID-19 and food.

Farmers' Markets/Farm Stands/CSAs in Massachusetts

Farmers' markets and farm stands (including Community Supported Agriculture farm stands (CSAs)) are primary sales outlets for many Massachusetts farms. Maintaining and increasing access to local food is essential, particularly in times of unsteadiness. Local farming may fill a critical void in food distribution patterns if the response to COVID-19 increases

and growing regions located in the Western U.S. experience production and distribution challenges. The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, along with its State and Federal partners, are focused on enabling farm stands and farmer markets to sell safe, healthy and local products during the COVID-19 response. Our aim continues to be the support of the many farms that will be entering the production season so they are able to provide fresh farm products to the residents, retail markets and restaurants in the Commonwealth.

What are some best practices for farmers' markets/farm stands and other local produce/farm product disbursement sites to limit the spread of COVID-19?

1. **Social Distancing:** Market managers should increase the space between vendors to assist in patron flow and reduce crowding at vendor stations. Setting up vendor tables in a straight run or "L" formation should assist visitors in maintaining a safe distance as they visit the market. Market managers may also consider limiting the number of customers who can enter the market space at one time based on visitation rates. Markets are strongly encouraged to remind customers of "social distancing", maintaining a space of at least six feet from one another while shopping at farmers markets, through signage at prominent locations and vendor tables and through verbal reinforcement. As a reminder, Market staff, vendors and customers should:
 - 1) Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
 - 2) Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - 3) Stay home from the market when you are sick.
 - 4) Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
 - 5) Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
2. **Product Samples:** Farmers' markets should eliminate the offer of samples of products to reduce opportunities for contamination during COVID-19 response in the Commonwealth.
3. **Minimize the Number of Touches:** Market managers and vendors should minimize the handling of produce and products by both staff and customers disallowing the touching of produce at vendor tables and sales points. Vendors are encouraged to facilitate reduced handling by utilizing small produce/product displays and lists on signage or chalkboards to communicate product lists and availability while keeping produce for sale in larger bins that are covered and out of reach of customers. Online ordering via email or pre-bagged orders are options that can be considered by markets/vendors as well as drive-up systems.
4. **The use of reusable bags:** Farmers' market managers, market staff, as well as vendors and their employees, shall not perform bagging of produce if reusable bags are utilized until further notice. Vendors may choose to use recyclable paper bags, compostable plastic bags or single-use plastic bags during COVID-19 response operations in the Commonwealth.
5. **Should farms/vendors be disinfecting produce?** As noted above, there is no indication that COVID-19 is transmitted 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. If you are using a disinfectant on produce, please follow the instructions located on the label of the product to find directions on the proper use of the product.

6. **Market/Vendor Display cleaning/sanitizing:** Vendors are encouraged to limit the use of tablecloths in order to make it easier to clean and sanitize table surfaces, or utilize a sheet of clear plastic over the top of the tablecloth to facilitate increased cleaning and sanitizing of contact surfaces. Vendors should clean and sanitize their displays, including their tables and items used to display produce in, at the end of every market and at intervals during market operation. Markets are recommended to discontinue the use of display items that cannot be cleaned and sanitized. The virus that causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19) can be stable for several hours to days on surfaces, up to 24 hours on cardboard and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/new-coronavirus-stable-hours-surfaces>.
7. **Can Markets/vendors use bleach as a sanitizing agent on contact surfaces?** Yes, you can also follow the CDC guidance and use a [mixture of bleach](#) and water (5 tbsp per gallon or 4 tsp per quart).
8. **What should Markets/CSAs and vendors use for disinfection and sanitizing?** The EPA has provided [a list of disinfectants for use against SARS-CoV-2](#), the virus causing COVID-19. 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, you can use the produce at Market or on bins and containers used for CSA deliveries. Consider reviewing the label for that product and using it for disinfection of specific high-touch surfaces if applicable.
9. **Hand washing/hygiene:** Markets are encouraged to make available supplies for event staff and participants to promote personal hygiene practice during COVID-19 response, including but not limited to portable sinks equipped with soap and paper towels, hand sanitizers and paper towels. Hand washing stations can be brought in by the market for customer and vendor use. Hand sanitizer stations can be useful, though should not be used as a replacement for handwashing. (Masks are not recommended for healthy adults unless they are caring for someone with COVID-19.)
10. **Gloves:** Market managers, staff and vendors must utilize disposable gloves at all times during market/CSA operations. Gloves can provide a barrier between hands and produce, preventing transmission of pathogens. They can also be a good reminder not to touch your face. Remember however, that gloves can be a source of contamination if not used properly. Follow [CDC glove removal guidelines](#). Please remember to [follow hand washing guidelines](#) recommended by the CDC before putting on gloves and between glove change-outs.
11. **Money Handling:** Markets and vendors should minimize cash transactions. If more than one person is working the table, vendors should designate one person to handle money and another to handle produce/product. Vendors can round their prices to the nearest dollar so they can reduce the acceptance of coins, and minimize the handling of change. Wipe down credit card readers and POS equipment periodically and between transactions. Online payment application platforms used on smartphones, such as Venmo or PayPal, are a viable option to facilitate transactions at markets and farm stands.
12. **Establish Relationships:** Communicate with key community partners such as local health departments and the site host of your market and collaborate with them on broader planning efforts during COVID-19 response.
13. **Plan for Cancellations:** Identify actions to take if you need to cancel the market, such as communications with customers and vendors. Share planned closure communication strategy and channels with vendors in advance. If you do need to close, consider alternative ordering and distribution methods. Consider suspending penalties for last minute vendor cancellations.

14. **Customer/Consumer Education and Outreach:** Keep market staff, vendors and customers updated on market information and guidelines and ensure folks who are sick stay home. Emphasize that protecting public health is paramount to your market and describe any changes to market procedures to prevent the spread of infection. Use health messages and materials developed by credible public health sources such as your local public health department, the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health or CDC/NIH to encourage your event staff and participants to practice good personal health habits. Let your customers know what steps you are taking to keep them and your market venue/farm stand/CSA safe.

Future Updates

This information is based on what we know now and will be updated as we learn more. Please visit <https://www.mass.gov/agr> and <https://www.mass.gov/resource/information-on-the-outbreak-of-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19> for updates.