

# Cleanliness is key to homegrown produce



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**Q**uestion: What steps should I be taking to ensure my family doesn't contract any food-borne illnesses like Salmonella or E. coli from our home vegetable garden?

**Answer:** With the increasingly popular trend of raising homegrown produce, food safety takes on even more importance. Water, tools, animals and manure-contaminated soil can all be factors in spreading harmful bacteria, viruses and parasites in your garden and ultimately onto your dinner plate if careful attention is not given to good sanitary practices.

Here's some things to consider when preparing your garden for planting, maintaining your garden and delivering your harvest to the kitchen.

■ **Clean Soil:** Locate your vegetable garden away from manure piles, septic systems, well caps and areas where wild-life, farm animals or pets roam. Don't use manure unless it has been heat-composted (at least 130 degrees) or better yet, purchase commercially



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Homegrown produce is increasingly popular. Make sure you are taking the necessary precautions to avoid harmful bacteria, viruses and parasites in your garden and in your kitchen.

composted materials.

Never have any animal waste, meat scraps or dairy product waste in your compost bin. Be sure your vegetable garden isn't located downhill or downwind from an area where animal droppings are concentrated.

■ **Clean Water:** Know the quality of your irrigation water. It's best to use municipal tap water for overhead watering and when washing produce.

Install a drip irrigation system to reduce wetting of leaf and fruit surfaces. If using well water, have it tested once or twice a year for the presence of E. coli bacteria. Avoid using water captured from roof runoff to

irrigate leafy vegetables that are to be eaten raw, as it may be contaminated with bird or squirrel droppings.

If you have no other water source, grow vegetables that need to be cooked or those that can be trellised off the ground such as tomatoes and cucumbers. When mixing up sprays to be applied to fruits or vegetables, always use potable water — sprayers are notorious places for bacteria to breed.

■ **Clean Hands:** Always use gardening or disposable gloves when working in your garden and especially when handling manures and compost. Any open wounds on your hands can

expose you to a bacterial infection. Wash your hands before harvesting as well as afterwards, giving special attention to cleaning around the fingernails as well.

■ **Clean Surfaces:** Always use a clean, food-grade container to transport the produce from the garden to your kitchen.

Counter tops and work surfaces should be sanitized with a diluted bleach solution (1 teaspoon in 4 cups of water) or with pure white vinegar. Hose off garden tools, shoes or boots away from your garden to avoid contamination. Brush, shake or rub off any soil or debris from produce before bringing it into the kitchen. Use clean, running tap water

to wash your produce. Never wash berries until you are ready to eat them.

■ Fruits and vegetables such as onions, potatoes and tomatoes can be stored at room temperature in a cool, dry, pest-free and well-ventilated area that is separate from household chemicals.

■ Discard any produce with rotten spots as rot allows harmful pathogens to grow and thrive in that fruit or vegetable.

With a little bit of knowledge of food safety and some good old-fashioned common sense, home gardeners should be able to enjoy

the fruits of their labors without fear.

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*Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-672-4461, or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.*