



CULTIVATING NUTRITION & LEARNING
THROUGH IDAHO SCHOOL GARDENS



Connecting School Gardens to the Cafeteria

The school breakfast and lunch programs are a perfect partnership for school gardens. Schools can grow food in the school garden that can be used in student meals. The USDA and the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare allow schools to serve food grown in school gardens to students. A letter from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Office of Food Protection can be found in the appendix stating that “the practice of using produce grown in and harvested from a school garden is acceptable.” The Office of Food Protection does recommend schools follow good food safety practices and that the growing and harvesting process should be monitored to protect against any possible contamination.

School Garden Food Safety

Food safety in your school garden program is very important. Microorganisms are a natural part of the environment and can be a problem whether you choose to use organic or conventional gardening methods.

You can reduce the levels of these microorganisms with good gardening and harvesting practices. Thorough washing and careful preparation will further reduce the level of the pathogens found on the outer surface of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Five Steps to Food Safe Gardening

Adapted from University of Connecticut's Five Steps to Food Safe School Gardening

Here are five simple steps school gardeners should follow to reduce the risk of foodborne illness when eating the produce from your school garden.

STEP 1: PREPARE THE GARDEN FOR PLANTING

- Be aware of your school's rules and regulations and how they pertain to your garden project.
- Locate vegetable gardens away from manure piles, well caps, garbage cans, septic systems, run-off from any potential sources of contamination, and areas where wildlife, farm animals, or pets roam.
- Use compost safely. Compost is the natural breakdown product of leaves, stems, manures and other organic materials. To be safe for gardening, your compost must reach a temperature of at least 130 °F. Do not use any animal waste, including pet waste, meat scraps or dairy product waste in your compost bin.
- Work with the maintenance staff at the school to ensure safe practices on the school grounds near the garden.

STEP 2: MAINTAIN THE GARDEN

- Schools must water their gardens with water from an approved public water system. You can be sure that water from a municipal or public water system is safe.
- Surface water (lakes, ponds, rivers and streams) can be polluted by sewage or animal waste, fertilizers and pesticides, or chemicals from industry and should not be used.



- During the gardening season, keep cats, dogs and other pets out of the garden, as animal waste can be a source of bacteria, parasites and viruses.
- Students should always wash their hands after working in the garden, especially if handling compost.
- Items that can be safely composted from the school include: vegetable peelings, leaves, grass, and shredded paper.

STEP 3: HARVEST GARDEN PRODUCE

- Do not let students work in the garden when suffering from vomiting and/or diarrhea.
- Always wash your hands before and after harvesting fresh produce.
- Use clean gloves (that have not been used to stir compost or pull weeds) or clean hands when picking produce.
- Use clean, food-grade containers. Food-grade containers are made from materials designed specifically to safely hold food. Garbage bags, trash cans, and any containers that originally held chemicals such as household cleaners or pesticides are not food-grade.
- All tools used in the garden must be used solely in the garden and cleaned regularly.

STEP 4: STORE GARDEN PRODUCE

- Shake, rub or brush off any garden dirt with a paper towel or soft brush while still outside. Store unwashed produce in plastic bags or containers. Be sure to label the container in a way that makes it clear to others that it must be washed prior to use.
- Keep fruit and vegetable bins clean.

- Avoid damaged produce. Pre-existing cuts in fruits and vegetables can provide an entry for pathogens.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables needing refrigeration (melons, cut leafy greens, and cut tomatoes) can be stored at 40° F or less.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables stored at room temperature (onions, potatoes, whole tomatoes) should be in a cool, dry, pest-free, well-ventilated area separate from household chemicals.

STEP 5: PREPARING AND SERVING FRESH GARDEN PRODUCE

More often than not, we eat fresh fruits and vegetables raw, so we cannot rely on the heat of cooking to destroy pathogens that might be on our lettuce or tomatoes. It is important to prepare raw produce with food safety in mind.

- Always wash your hands before and after handling fresh produce.
- Rinse fresh fruits and vegetables under cool, running, potable, clean water even if you do not plan to eat the skin or rind.
- Never use soap, detergent, or bleach solution to wash fresh fruits or vegetables. These solutions can affect flavor and may not be safe to ingest.
- If you have leftover produce that has been cut, sliced, or cooked, store it in clean, airtight containers in the refrigerator at 40° F or less.

