Other considerations and recommendations

Review school district rules and regulations. Some plants that can cause serious allergic reactions may be prohibited.

Align a school garden program with any relevant school district wellness policies, school procedures for receiving gifts and donations, working with parent and community volunteers, and district liability policies.

Safe handling information should be provided to anyone involved in the growing, harvesting, and preparing of foods from a school garden.

Consider using your school garden as an educational tool to teach students about food safety procedures and incorporate curricula that teach to these issues in your garden educational plan.

The best practices outlined in this brochure are intended to serve as a framework and may be easily adapted to meet individual school settings and regional requirements.

These best practices were created as a collaborative effort among school garden practitioners from across the country. Thanks to Kelly Erwin, Deb Habib, Tegan Hagy, Noli Hoye, Dana Hudson, Marion Kalb, Emily Jackson, Catherine Sands, and Amy Winston. This was created with the support of the National Farm to School Network www.farmtoschool.org

Fresh, Healthy & Safe Food:

Best Practices for Using Produce From School Gardens

School gardens, an important part of the Farm To School effort, are educational living laboratories. Produce from school gardens can be a part of school cafeteria meals, can be donated to the community, or can be used in classroom and after school taste-testing activities to further educate students in the “seed to table” concept. When students are involved directly in the growing and harvesting of healthy fruits and vegetables, they are more likely to try those foods and incorporate them into a healthy foods diet.

The following best practices brochure outlines basic food safety guidelines for those involved with school gardens.

Garden Preparation

Soil should be tested for contaminants before planting, especially if the school garden is near parking areas or other high-traffic zones. Consider purchasing soil meant for food production from an established retail entity to ensure soil safety and traceability.

Water for irrigation needs to be potable and from a tested source. Soil and water testing kits are available through state agricultural extension offices or state health offices.

Building materials for garden beds, containers, stakes or trellises should be constructed of nontoxic, non-leaching material (no pressure treated wood or used tires).

Growing Practices

Consider the source when buying seeds for a school garden. Look for quality seeds that are not genetically modified and come from companies that have taken a “safe seed pledge.”

Do not use synthetic pesticides or herbicides because they can leave toxic residue on food. Coordinate with school groundskeeping or custodial staff about school garden goals, protocols and maintenance plan, especially concerns about the presence of pesticides on or near the garden.

Organic matter should be fully composted in aerobic conditions and at high temperatures before application. Avoid raw manure. Limit composted manure to what can be bought from a commercial outlet to ensure traceability.

If your school has a composting program for cafeteria waste, use that compost for flowers, ornamental plants and trees rather than for garden beds where food is grown. Compost that comes from garden waste can be applied to food-growing beds if deemed appropriate by the school garden supervisor and/or compost coordinator.

Harvesting and Handling

Students, staff, parents or volunteers involved in harvesting should wash hands thoroughly in warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds before harvesting. Anyone with open cuts or wounds on their extremities should not participate in harvest until they have healed.

All harvesting tools--scissors, bowls, tubs--should be food-grade and/or food service approved and designated solely for harvest and food handling. The tools should be cleaned regularly with hot water and soap & dried.

School garden produce delivered for use in a school cafeteria should be received by food service personnel upon delivery with the same system used to receive and inspect all other incoming products.

If storage is necessary, produce should be cooled and refrigerated promptly after harvest. Temperatures vary on type of produce being harvested; specific post-harvest storage and transportation temperatures can be found at http://postharvest.ucdavis.edu/produce/storage/index.shtm

School garden produce should be washed according to the standards in place for conventionally received produce. Staff with ServSafe or comparable food-safety certification should supervise students, parents, or staff who participate in any food preparation, taste-testings or special cafeteria events.