



Retail Food-Safety Guide

Building a safe and secure supply chain.

BY JACQUELINE ROSS LIEBERMAN

Because much of produce is never cooked before it is consumed, keeping it free from illness-causing organisms such as mold and bacteria is especially important from the time it is grown until it reaches the consumer's plate.

And because of the growth in sales of fresh-cut produce, which must be kept refrigerated and which might not be washed again before it is eaten (meaning contaminants must be removed before it reaches the consumer), safety risks have also grown. For these reasons, every retailer should have a risk-management plan in place.

"Produce is very unique in that, once it's contaminated, it's very difficult to get rid of the contaminants," explains Jim Gorny, vice president of quality assurance and technology for the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association (UFFVA), located in Washington, D.C. "Food safety is everyone's responsibility in the distribution chain."

"In the long run, the farm-to-table approach will benefit everyone," notes Jill Hollingsworth, vice president of food safety programs for the Food Marketing Institute (FMI), based in Washington, D.C.

Here is how to make sure everyone does his or her part.

KNOW THY VENDOR

When it comes to buying produce, says Gorny, "I think the

important message is 'Know thy vendor.' It's not always prudent to buy from the low-cost leader. You should have a good relationship with your vendors. Knowing who you're buying from is the most important thing."

"Retailers should be looking for good-quality product," explains David Gombas, vice president of technical services for the International Fresh-Cut Produce Association (IFCPA), Alexandria, VA. "They should be looking for suppliers who have good safety programs in place and who are willing to work with them to meet their needs."

One way to ensure safe produce from the farm is to insist that your suppliers fill out legal forms stating Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system, a National Academy of Sciences-endorsed model that uses preventative measures and predetermined corrective actions at specific points in the production process based on a hazard analysis of the commodity and product.

Beyond getting a supplier's word in writing, verifying that the produce you are purchasing is grown and processed according to these standards is key to managing risk.

While some stores have in place their own food safety programs that include visiting suppliers and conducting their own audits, there are times when a third-party auditor makes things much easier.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) voluntary