

Department of Food Science

GLOVE AND MASK USE BY PRODUCE FARMWORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is highly recommended that direct farm marketers (pick-your-own operations, farm stands, etc.) take special precautions to avoid the spread of the virus among employees and customers. The wearing of gloves and cloth masks by both employees and customers, where appropriate, in addition to strict social distancing are the best practices for the near future.

Masks

Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and government health specialists recommend everyone wear a cloth mask while in public. The reason is to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by asymptomatic carriers, or carriers that are not showing any symptoms, of the virus. Without widespread testing to identify asymptomatic carriers, the best option to prevent spreading the virus is for everyone to wear a cloth mask. The cloth mask worn by a carrier will significantly reduce the spread of the virus to others. Directions for making masks can be found readily online including sew and no sew options. Some examples can be found here:

- www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html
- foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Bandanas-as-Face-Coverings_COVID-19_Flyer.pdf? fwd=no
- www.fda.gov/media/137327/download

Here are some recommendations for food/produce handlers regarding masks:

- During this COVID-19 pandemic, all employees should be required to wear a cloth mask to minimize the spread of the virus. Studies have shown a threefold reduction in virus transmission from an infected person.
- Wearing a mask will help protect employees from each other, as well as the customers visiting the farm.

- Recommending, or requiring, all customers to wear masks is a good practice but may be difficult to enforce. Communication on your website, social media, farm voicemail, and prominent farm signage will help. Offering an alternative for customers who arrive without a mask, such as pre-picked fruits or vegetables, may be a good option.
- Masks must be properly washed and dried daily (e.g., in a washing machine in hot water) and should be changed more often if too damp or dirty during long shifts.

Gloves

Gloves can provide an added barrier between worker hands and the surfaces they may come in contact with during their work at the farm. They can also protect the food from contaminants on worker hands. However, gloves are not a replacement for proper handwashing and gloves only work if used properly.

- Currently gloves are not recommended for use during produce harvesting, especially if employees are not familiar with proper glove use.
- Single-use, or disposable, gloves should be worn by all farm employees who are grading and sorting fruit on a packing line, handling money, delivering product to customer vehicles, cleaning and disinfecting, and other tasks where they may come in contact with high touch surfaces.
- Polyethylene gloves are the cheapest (about \$8 for 500 gloves) but are best for very short-term use (perhaps only a few minutes). When handling fresh produce during the point of sale, these gloves may be the best option.
- Vinyl or nitrile gloves are better fitting for jobs requiring more dexterity (about \$8 for 100 gloves).
- Training will need to be conducted on proper glove use for workers not accustomed to wearing gloves. This training includes good handwashing techniques and frequent handwashing after touching surfaces other than produce.
- Those employees not handling product, but touching “public” surfaces (i.e., money, handwashing stations, restrooms, etc.) should be wearing some type of gloves to protect themselves from possible contamination.
- Best practices for wearing gloves by food handlers:
 - Thoroughly washing and drying hands BEFORE donning gloves is critically important to reduce any cross-contamination from your hands to the gloves.
 - Only touching the edges of the gloves while putting them on will reduce points of contact with the glove
 - Change gloves often (at least every two to four hours) depending on the conditions of use. Torn or damaged gloves should be replaced immediately.
 - Be mindful of the surfaces you touch with the gloves. Try to only touch food and food contact surfaces if possible.
 - Always re-wash hands after removing/replacing gloves.

Customer Use of Mask and Gloves

- It is not recommended that customers be asked to wear gloves. Improper use can be worse than no gloves at all. However, you can have handwashing stations and hand sanitizer readily available to customers as they enter the store and encourage their use through signage.
- Likewise, it will be difficult to require customers to wear cloth masks. However, they are recommended for any persons in public during the pandemic. Communication of your expectations for the safety of your employees may help encourage their use.



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