Having a school garden is great because it provides a more direct connection with food for those growing and eating it and allows greater knowledge and control over production methods. It is important to follow good food safety protocol in order to avoid the risk of pathogenic microorganisms or chemicals that may contaminate your crops. This risk, fortunately, can be greatly reduced by following these safety guidelines and by familiarizing yourself with Federal, State, and Local regulations regarding health and sanitation issues. Another bonus? This creates a perfect opportunity to discuss Food Safety in class with the students!

**Location**

Where you decide to put the garden can greatly affect the food it grows. Keeping these tips in mind can minimize the possibility of harmful substances coming into contact with your crop.

When selecting a garden site, avoid:

- High-traffic areas
- Areas where water is apt to collect (this is a recipe for disease and it hinders plant growth and proliferation)
- Low areas prone to run-off
- Anywhere near standing water, wells, septic systems, or dumpsters.
- Placing bird feeders or birdbaths around the garden. These attract rodents in addition to birds, thereby increasing the likelihood of contamination through animal droppings.

Before you dig:

- Call Iowa’s Digger’s Hotline (1-800-292-8989) before turning over any new ground to ensure putting in the garden will not damage any underground pipelines or wires.
- Consult the school’s facilities team and/or custodial staff and to make sure pesticides will not be applied anywhere near the garden. A 30ft. buffer strip is recommended.
- It is also important to find out where and when lawns have been sprayed in the past. Tests for herbicides can be expensive, so it is best to locate new gardens where spraying has not occurred for at least a year or two.

**Soil & Water**

It is extremely important to test the quality of your garden’s soil and water to be sure that they are safe for growing produce. You can call your local ISU-Extension and Outreach office (visit [http://www.extension.iastate.edu/content/county-offices](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/content/county-offices) to find contact information for your county) for more information on how to test your soil and water and where to purchase testing kits. In addition, keep the following in mind.

- For raised beds or indoor gardens, purchase soil intended for use in food production.
- If using soil from the school grounds, it is important to test the lead content. 5-40ppm is natural, but it would be advisable to use purchased soil for levels much higher than that. Gardens should not be located in an area where the lead content measures 300 ppm or more.
- Want to use compost as a soil supplement? Be sure to follow the guidelines detailed in “Composting”.
SOIL & WATER, CONTINUED

- Water should come from a reliable source (such as public or municipal water) and should be potable. Water should not come from a source such as a nearby lake, as this surface water is likely to harbor harmful microorganisms or toxic farm chemicals.
- If your school uses well water, it is advisable to test it once a year to ensure it meets EPA standards.

MATERIALS & MAINTENANCE

Using the correct (clean) materials and keeping up proper maintenance also contributes to the overall safety of your school’s garden.

DO USE:

- Non-toxic and non-leaching materials used for containers, beds, stakes, trellises, and fences.
- Clean gardening tools that are only used in the garden.
- Food-grade harvesting materials (like clean containers that once held food or kitchen bowls.) These materials should be used only for harvesting (for example, don’t reuse bowls used in class for a science experiment.)

DO NOT USE:

- Synthetic pesticides, herbicides, insecticides, or fungicides. (Instead, use organic versions or just pull the weeds – another fun way to involve the kids!)
- Garbage bags, trash cans, or any containers that once held chemicals (even if they have been cleaned) as harvesting materials.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Keep any pets and/or wild animals out of the garden. Animals and their droppings can carry pathogens and contaminate produce. If this is an issue in your garden, consider installing fencing.
- Keep grass surrounding the garden mowed down. This reduces any edge vegetation that may provide a habitat for rodents.
- Remove any rotting produce that falls.
- Stay away from working in the garden if you are sick, and make sure students do the same!

HARVESTING

Cleanliness during harvesting is key to reducing the risk of contamination.

Remember to:

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water both before and after harvesting.
- Wear gardening gloves if you have any cuts or open wounds on your hands.
- Take care to shake or brush off all excess soil on produce before placing in collection containers.
In the Kitchen

Despite taking all the preceding precautions, there is still a slight risk of the produce being contaminated once it enters the kitchen. For this reason, extra care should be taken in the use, storage, and preparation of the garden’s crops.

In use:

- All food should be received and inspected by food service personnel as with other “conventional” incoming food.
- Following a meal, any leftover produce should be placed in a refrigerator.
- Avoid cross-contamination between washed and unwashed produce.

In storage:

- If you wash the produce prior to storage, make sure that it is thoroughly dried. Any moisture lingering on the food can become a breeding ground for harmful microorganisms. This is especially important with crops such as spinach and lettuce.
- All produce should be stored in bags to keep the refrigerator (or other storage area) clean. These bags should be labeled with the date and whether or not the produce has been washed.
- Produce that needs to be stored at room temperature should be kept in a cool, dry, pest-free, well-ventilated area away from chemicals.
- Monitor produce in storage; any moldy produce should be thrown out.

In preparation:

- Wash hands, workspace, and utensils thoroughly before and after any prep work.
- Wash all produce under cool, running tap water—even produce that was washed prior to storage and produce with a peel or rind that will be removed.
- Do not use soap, detergent, or bleach to wash produce.
- Cut away any bruises that may be on produce before serving.
The preceding guidelines will greatly help to assure the produce from your school's garden is safe to enjoy. In addition, it is important to keep these general safety tips in mind while working in the garden.

- Be wary of bug bites, sunburn, rashes such as poison ivy and injuries from tools.
- Be mindful of any allergies students may have.
- Remind students not to eat anything from the garden unless an adult has given the okay.
- Make sure students wear good shoes and proper clothing on days when they are working in the garden, and encourage them to bring hats for added sun protection.
- Students (especially younger students) should not be present when powdered materials (some brands of fertilizer, lime, etc.) are being applied to the garden. These may create dust that could be harmful if inhaled, so it is best to have adults or older students equipped with dust masks apply these materials.