

Rotating Extension Columns

By: Daniel E. Mullins

IFAS Extension Commercial Horticulture Agent

Santa Rosa County

GAPs Training and Preparation for an Audit - A Must for High Volume Fruit & Vegetable Producers

Food safety is now high on the list of consumer worries even though the risk of foodborne illness in the United States is low when compared to many other countries. Consumers are so concerned about food safety that many prefer locally grown products, knowing where their food was grown, how it was grown and in some cases even who grew it.

Consumer concerns have had their effects upon the food production industry and have resulted in the rapid development of helpful and accessible information. In 1998 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) published the *Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables*. It is available at <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/prodguid.html>.

This document was intended to assist domestic and foreign growers, packers and shippers of fresh fruits and vegetables by increasing awareness of potential hazards and providing suggestions for specific operations. These guidelines were broad-based and voluntary.

At about the same time, Cornell University launched a major program known as the national GAPs (good agricultural practices) program. Until recently GAPs were considered guidelines, and not mandatory. However, recent produce-related food borne illness outbreaks are encouraging a shift towards some type of regulatory requirement. Also, purchasing requirements and some vendor programs may require that participating growers and packers have a formal, documented GAPs program in place.

Florida now has tomato regulations in place. These regulations became effective on April 16, 2008 and cover the production, harvest, handling and marketing of fresh market tomatoes. The purpose is to enhance the safety of tomatoes produced, packed, repacked, distributed and sold in the state.

The "Tomato Best Practices Manual" contains the information about this program. It is available from the Florida Department of Agriculture or by downloading the 14 page document from:

www.doacs.state.fl.us/fs/TomatoBestPractices.pdf

It now appears that food safety regulations for other crops are not far behind. Greens, blueberries and other crops are now under consideration and it probably won't be long before required practices are in place. Also, some volume produce buyers are beginning to require production and handling audits before they will purchase any fruits and vegetables from specific farms.

Most fruit and vegetable growers who wish to sell their products to high volume buyers should begin working toward compliance and learning to prepare for an audit. One such opportunity will be provided by the University of Florida, Santa Rosa County Extension and Team Santa Rosa's Panhandle Fresh Marketing Association on Wednesday, November 18.

The program entitled "Developing a Food Safety Program for Vegetable and Fruit Growers/Packers" is a day long program beginning at 8:30 a.m. at the Santa Rosa County Extension office. The address is 6263 Dogwood Drive, Milton, Florida. For further information and for registration call 850-623-3868.