

Backyard gardens need good food-safety practices, too

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The recent tomato contamination outbreak has many people thinking about growing their own garden-fresh fruits and vegetables. But a food-safety specialist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences says it's not where the produce is grown, but how it's grown, so amateur cultivators should know a few important tips about home-garden food safety.

Since many of the bacteria and parasites that make people sick are transmitted through animal and human waste, it's important to protect the garden from wild animals and household pets, said Luke LaBorde, associate professor of food science. While people are sharing their harvest with them, they could be sharing potential illnesses via saliva and droppings.

"It's just common sense," LaBorde said. "We don't want droppings to contact the produce, particularly if we're going to be eating it raw -- which we often are.

"Treat your garden like something you want to eat," he added. "You don't want birds and animals snooping around your food. Deer are cute, and they'll be attracted to your lettuce and green peppers. But they'll leave something behind, so try to divert them to another area."

LaBorde said it's also important to keep cats, dogs and other pets out of the garden. While people might think they're sampling the fresh, young plants, pets may see the garden patch as a litter box or Porta Potty.

"During the growing and harvesting seasons, especially, you have to keep a watchful eye," LaBorde warned. "People who grow fruits and vegetables at home should be aware of good agricultural practices, such as washing their hands after harvesting and avoiding using composted animal manure in their gardens, especially dog and cat droppings. They contain parasites that aren't killed by the composting process."

After harvesting fruits and vegetables, use the standard food-safety practices recommended for any home kitchen. Other tips include:

-- Don't allow piles of decaying plant matter to collect in the garden. "Neatness in the garden is a good idea," he said. "Cuttings and garden waste can attract insects that can transfer bacteria. So keep your garden neat and clean, take cuttings to the compost pile and keep the animals out. And be sure the compost pile is separated by some distance from the garden area, to guard against contamination in the event of heavy rain or flooding."

-- Don't place feeding stations for birds, squirrels or other wild animals in or near the garden. "Having a bird house or feeder in your garden may look nice, but that's not a good idea, because bird droppings contain harmful bacteria," LaBorde said.

-- Be cautious about using rain barrels and other sources of collected precipitation. "We can't be sure of the quality of water we collect from a rain barrel or stream," LaBorde said. "It may very well be safe, but it can be contaminated with pathogens from roof-dwelling birds or other creatures -- or possibly chemicals released by the roofing. We just don't know, so you should treat this water as nonpotable."

Using collected water in a drip irrigation system is usually fine, he said, since water-borne bacteria will die when they get into the soil. But don't spray that water on any edible part of the crops -- especially close to

harvest time. LaBorde also cautions against using rainwater on root crops that might be eaten raw, such as green onions or carrots. "Municipal water is safest," he said, "and well water is usually safe if you have your wells tested every year, which is the norm."

-- Locate the garden away from areas where wild animals or pets might congregate to rest or nibble on shrubs. "This is the same problem that commercial growers are facing," he said. "For a small garden, it's easy to put up a small fence for dogs, but it's hard to keep deer out -- they're going to browse no matter what. So just be on the alert for droppings."

Source: The Pennsylvania State University

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