

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



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Farm Pick-Your-Own (PYO)/Agricultural Tourism Activities - Guidance Memo #5

The current COVID-19 pandemic continues to be an on-going concern, and many farms are wondering what they can and should do. The information provided in this document is intended to help guide the fruit and vegetable farming community who engage in direct-market sales and support farm visit activities, such as pick-your-own operations.

If you have any concerns or suggestions, please contact the Michael Botelho at MDAR: (508) 985-8751, or UMASS Agricultural Extension Vegetable Program at: lmckeag@umass.edu or via phone at (413) 545-1051.

Foodborne Exposure to COVID-19 (As of 3/24/20)

Unlike foodborne gastrointestinal (GI) viruses like norovirus and hepatitis A that often make people ill through contaminated food, SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, is a virus that causes respiratory illness. Foodborne exposure to this virus is not known to be a route of transmission.

The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person. This includes between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet), and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads.

Please visit: <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/food-safety-and-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19> for further information on COVID-19 and food.

Farm Pick-Your-Own (PYO) Activities in Massachusetts

Maintaining and increasing access to local food is essential, particularly in times of market unsteadiness.

Farm Pick-Your-Own (PYO) activities provide an important source of local produce for consumers and a critical harvest activity for many Massachusetts fruit and vegetable farms. Fresh and local fruits and vegetables are a nutritious, safe and healthy choice for local consumers and their availability continues to fill a crucial role in the local food supply during COVID-19 response in the Commonwealth.

The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, along with its State and Federal partners, are focused on enabling farms to continue to grow, harvest and market safe, healthy and local produce during the COVID-19 response. With anticipated regional disruptions of domestic crop production and distribution, the ability of the farms in the Commonwealth to supply fresh farm products are critical to the health and well-being of the citizens of Massachusetts.

While farms across the Commonwealth prepare for the growing season, many must modify several components and activities of their operations based on COVID-19 social distancing guidelines issued by the Commonwealth.

Guidelines for Farms who support Pick-Your-Own (PYO) activities to limit the spread of COVID-19.

- 1) **Social Distancing on PYO Farms:** Farms that offer PYO activities as part of their operations should maintain robust social distancing guidelines as issued in the Commonwealth. Farm/PYO managers and staff must limit the number of PYO customers who can enter fields, areas and orchards at one time, based on visitation rates and venues designated at the farm to accommodate visitors.

Farms that conduct agricultural tourism events during PYO activities, such as hayrides, mazes and other related activities, including but not limited to, educational sessions and farm tours, are not allowed to conduct such activities when COVID-19 response/guidance is in force in the Commonwealth. Farms should contact their local Board of Health with any questions they may have on social distancing requirements in their specific jurisdiction.

PYO operations must remind customers of “social distancing” protocols, maintaining a space of at least six (6) feet from one another while on farm, and should follow guidance for the use of cloth face coverings/masks in public and while on the farm picking fruit and/or vegetables that may be issued by both state and local authorities

Signage at prominent locations, both at registration counters where payment is received, and at stations where harvest boxes, bags or other containers are made available to the public, as well as in fields, should clearly indicate social distancing guidelines, as well as the procedures and rules established by the farm for the conduct of PYO activities. Farm and PYO managers and staff should reinforce Federal, State, and local guidance and rules verbally when necessary.

As a reminder farm staff and PYO customers should:

- 1) Maintain social distancing space of at least six (6) feet from one another, or between family groups.
- 2) Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- 3) Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- 4) Stay home when you are sick.
- 5) Wash your hands frequently.
- 6) Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- 7) Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- 8) Contact information of local state and public health offices.

2) PYO Activity Plans: Farms that are supporting PYO activities are recommended to develop an activity plan that identifies the PYO operations rules, by crop, that supports State COVID-19 guidance in-force, as well as rules that are established by the farm. The plan should include the following information:

- 1) Location of parking areas and number of spaces available.
- 2) Location of fields/crops available for PYO.
- 3) Date range of PYO activities by crop.
- 4) Primary access points for PYO areas.
- 5) Number of customers allowed in field/areas/orchards and field rows at any one time.
- 6) Number and location(s) of hand washing/hand sanitizing stations.

3) Farm Communication to Customers: Let your customers know what steps you are taking to keep them safe while on the farm and where resources (e.g. hand washing stations) are located and available while they are visiting. Ensure that they know the rules associated with PYO activities and who they should contact if a problem or questions arise while on the farm. The use of signage, to communicate with customers while on farm, is critical to ensure that issued guidance is understood and maintained.

4) Customers in the PYO Field/Area/Orchard: Customers and staff should be allowed in PYO areas in limited numbers, allowing for the maintenance of social distancing and safe harvest of crops. Farms should implement practices that encourage guidelines by minimizing, not only the number of customers allowed in a field, area or orchard, but also by minimizing the number of customers in each field row during picking.

Based on current social distance guidelines in the Commonwealth of a six (6) foot buffer between individuals or family units, the number of customers allowed to enter PYO areas should be no larger than 30% of the total allowance of 380 per acre. Based widely on the variety of areas and crops supporting PYO operations, along with diversity in crops and field-row orientation the following guidelines are issued for customers in PYO areas:

- 1) Farms should ensure that no more than 30%, or 114 customers, of total allowance per acre, is allowed into PYO areas at any one time.
- 2) Farms with smaller areas assigned for PYO operations can utilize a ratio of 8-10 customers per 1,000 square feet, based largely on their increased ability to oversee activity.
- 3) Farms are encouraged to further identify and communicate to customers specific harvest rules, traffic flow patterns and exit points for PYO areas.
- 4) Children should maintain proximity to family members and guardians while in PYO areas.
- 5) Family groups can be assigned as one customer unit for access to PYO areas.

- 5) **PYO Staff and Customer use of Cloth Face Coverings/Masks:** PYO staff and customers must utilize cloth face coverings/masks while harvesting crops at PYO locations in-line with [CDC guidance](#), as well as state and local requirements. This is particularly important for certain PYO crops that place customers in close proximity to produce on the plant. Customers should be allowed to utilize masks and face coverings that they bring with them to the farm. Customers who do not have masks or cloth face coverings should not be allowed in PYO harvest areas.
- 6) **On-farm activities that support, or occur concurrently, with PYO operations:** Agricultural Tourism activities associated with PYO operations, such as corn-mazes, hay rides and other activities, including but not limited to, educational sessions and workshops, farm tours, and other activities not directly associated with the harvest of crops, are not allowed during COVID-19 response in the Commonwealth. These components of farm revenue generation, while important, are not listed as essential services in the Commonwealth.
- 7) **Carts and wagons used for Transportation to PYO areas:** Carts and Wagons used for the transportation of customers and staff from car lots to PYO fields and areas are allowed with certain modifications. These include the maintenance of social distance guidelines of six (6) feet between individuals and family groups and the cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting of carts and wagons at increased intervals. Elderly and at-risk populations should be given priority at transport pick-up and drop-off points.
- 8) **Minimize the Number of Touches during PYO Activities:** Farm PYO managers and staff, as well as customers, should minimize the handling of produce during PYO activities. Farm/PYO managers and staff are encouraged to facilitate reduced handling of produce on the plant by customers in the field. This should be accomplished through in-field monitoring, verbal reinforcement, and through signage that indicates rules of harvest (e.g.: harvest by assigned field-row, plant or area) designed to minimize touches and the damage of produce.

- 9) **Produce Samples-Consumption of PYO crops in the field:** PYO Farms should eliminate the offer of samples of produce/products to reduce opportunities for contamination during COVID-19 response in the Commonwealth. Customers must also not be allowed to eat produce in PYO fields, either off the plant or tree, or from harvested containers while in assigned PYO areas.
- 10) **The use of Reusable Harvest Bags/Containers and Boxes:** Farm staff, as well as PYO customers, shall not conduct the picking of produce if reusable harvest bags/containers and/or boxes are utilized until further notice. Farms must supply, to PYO customers, new single-use harvest bags/containers and boxes during COVID-19 response operations in the Commonwealth.
- 11) **PYO Harvest Bag/Containers and Box Storage:** New harvest bags/containers and/or boxes supplied by the farm for PYO operations should be stored away from customer flow areas and should be covered by a plastic covering. Customers should not be allowed to select, or handle harvest containers utilized for PYO activities. Farms are encouraged to hand-out harvest containers upon registration or at primary access points in PYO areas. Customers are not allowed to bring with them or utilize reusable bags during PYO activities on the farm.
- 12) **Disinfecting PYO Produce:** As noted above, there is no indication that COVID-19 is transmitted via produce. The virus is thought to be spread mainly from person to person [according to the CDC](#). For most farms the level of operational change and amount of disinfectant needed to disinfect produce is unrealistic. If you do choose to utilize a disinfectant on produce, please ensure that the product is allowed to be used on crops and verify that staff follows the instructions located on the label of the product for its proper use.
- 13) **PYO Registration/Check-in tables:** PYO farms should clean, sanitize and disinfect displays and contact surfaces at increased intervals during PYO operations. Farms are recommended to discontinue the use of PYO display items and contact surfaces that cannot be cleaned, sanitized and disinfected. The virus that causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19) can be stable for several hours to days on surfaces, up to 24 hours on cardboard, and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel. <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/new-coronavirus-stable-hours-surfaces>. PYO Farms must also conduct planning to maintain social distancing in wait-lines for registration, check-in and payment. Signage and markers should clearly indicate 6 feet between customers for social distancing purposes.
- 14) **Sanitizing and Disinfecting Contact Surfaces:** The EPA has provided [a list of disinfectants for use against SARS-CoV-2](#), the virus causing COVID-19. Very few of these products are common on the farm and may be hard to find. If you are currently using a sanitizer as part of a standard cleaning and sanitizing procedure for hard surfaces on your farm, consider reviewing the label for that product and using it for disinfection of specific high-touch surfaces if applicable.

- 15) **The use of bleach as a sanitizing agent on Contact Surfaces:** Bleach can be used as a sanitizing agent if utilized properly. Follow CDC guidance and use a [mixture of bleach](#) and water (5 tbsp per gallon or 4 tsp per quart) for on-farm use for the sanitizing and disinfecting of contact surfaces.
- 16) **Hand washing/hygiene stations:** PYO farms must make available hand washing stations and supplies for farm staff and customers to promote personal hygiene and issued guidance during COVID-19 response. Portable sinks equipped with soap, hand sanitizers and paper towels should be made available and should be relative to the anticipated total number of visitors to the farm. Hand washing stations can be brought in by the farm to augment current facilities for customer use. Hand sanitizer stations can be useful, though should not be used as a replacement for handwashing stations.
- 17) **Gloves:** Farm staff must utilize disposable gloves at all times during PYO operations. Gloves can provide a barrier between hands and produce, preventing transmission of pathogens. They can also be a good reminder not to touch your face. Remember however, that gloves can be a source of contamination if not used properly. Follow [CDC glove removal guidelines](#) and please remember to [follow hand washing guidelines](#) recommended by the CDC before putting on gloves and between glove change-outs.
- 18) **PYO Farm Money Handling:** Farms should minimize cash transactions. If more than one person is working the table, vendors should designate one person to handle money and another to handle produce/product. Vendors can round their prices to the nearest dollar so they can reduce the acceptance of coins and minimize the handling of change. Sanitize and disinfect credit card readers and POS equipment periodically and between transactions. Online payment application platforms used on smartphones, such as Venmo or PayPal, are a viable option to facilitate transactions at farms.
- 19) **Establish Relationships:** Communicate with key community partners, such as local health departments and town officials and collaborate with them on broader planning efforts during COVID-19 response.
- 20) **Plan for Cancellations:** Identify actions to take if you need to cancel or limit your PYO activity such as communications with customers and staff. Share planned closure communication strategy and channels with community partners in advance.
- 21) **PYO Customer/Consumer Education and Outreach:** Keep farm staff and customers updated on PYO information and guidelines and ensure folks who are sick stay home. Emphasize that protecting public health is paramount to your farm and describe any changes to PYO operations to prevent the spread of infection. Use health messages and materials developed by credible public health sources such as your local public health department, the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, or the CDC to encourage your farm staff and customers to practice good personal hygiene habits.

Future Updates

Our aim continues to be the support of the many farms that will be entering the production season and to the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables in the Commonwealth. Further guidance will be issued as the growing season commences and issued guidance will be extended or rescinded based on COVID-19 response operations in the Commonwealth.

This information is based on what we know now and will be updated as we learn more. Please visit <https://www.mass.gov/agr> and <https://www.mass.gov/resource/information-on-the-outbreak-of-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19> for updates.