**GAP’s Demystified**

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Good agricultural practices or GAPs certification is third-party food safety audit that some farms are pursuing. This allows farms to access markets such as wholesale buyers or grocery stores that are requiring the certification.

To understand GAPs, first realize that GAPs certification has been an industry reaction to food borne illness outbreaks such as *E. coli* O157:H7 on spinach. The standard was written before the science about food borne illnesses originating in farms was complete (the research is still being done), so writers tried to be logical and conservative.

At this time GAPs certification is buyer-driven, asked for by some wholesale buyers wanting to reduce their food borne illness liability rather than being a government requirement for all farms. The GAPs certification standard is not a single standard with government oversight at this time (early 2011). Rather, different certifiers can write and certify their own standards. Some buyers require certification by a specific entity, others do not—make sure you check with your buyer before you go through the certification process! USDA GAPs standard (written by the USDA, audits may be done by independent accredited companies or by NYS Ag and Markets) is commonly used by farm selling to grocery stores. Since the USDA GAPs audit is what we have experience with locally, the remainder of this article pertains specifically to USDA GAPs.

A farm can be certified crop by crop (GAPs certified for lettuce, for instance), or as a whole farm. Inspections happen annually. Inspection must take place during the harvest of the crop to be certified.

GAP’s focuses on the main three sources of possible food borne illness on produce that can originate with a farm: workers with inadequate personal hygiene, contaminated water used in irrigation or washing, and contamination by animal feces (wild or domestic).

The other major focus of GAPs is establishing procedures to deal with problems if they arise, such as the ability to trace back product at the point of sale to the farm and field where it was grown, and a written farm protocol to deal with a crisis such as a chemical spill or a food borne illness outbreak.

A written farm food safety plan details the food growing and handling protocol that the farm uses for each crop that is certified, and various record sheets must be kept to show that the farm is following the procedure outlined in the plan. Records are kept to track cooler temperatures, bathroom facilities cleaned, worker training, annual water testing, pest and rodent control, manure application, mock trace back, worker illness, first aid kit use, etc.

Remember that while GAPs certification is not mandated by the government, USDA GAPs is still a government standard for those who choose to be audited. Expect lots of record keeping. Many of the practices you’re already doing on your farm, but for certification those activities need to be documented.

Auditors use a checklist to determine how well policies and procedures are written and followed. The checklist is divided into sections (“scopes”), and each section must earn a grade of 80 percent for the farm to pass. “Scopes” are individual sections of the certification— all farms must pass the “General Question” portion, but other scopes can be certified or not, as you wish. The checklists aren’t a secret, you can see the exact rubric you’ll be graded on at ***www.ams.usda.gov/gapghp***. In fact, the easiest way to write a food safety plan that will pass the audit is to write it based directly answering the questions on the grading sheet.

Currently, reimbursement is available through NYS Ag and Markets to cover up to $750 of inspection fees. For a small farm well prepared for their audit, this normally covers all of the inspectors’ time. Ag and Markets inspectors charged $92/hour in 2010, and private audit companies have other fees.

*Editor’s note: Most of the small scale vegetable farms we surveyed could pass a GAPs audit with only minor changes in their practices and a lot of additional documentation. The biggest area for improvement seems to be in the farm bathroom facilities, which is a big focus of the GAPs program. Even an outhouse could pass the USDA GAPs audit if it was maintained clean and had a container of water set up to supply running hand-washing water with soap and single use towels.*