



Fall 2023

Safe Wisconsin Produce

Cranberries: Wisconsin's Official State Fruit

Despite being exempt from the Produce Safety Rule under §112.2(a)(1) as a commodity considered to be rarely consumed raw, cranberries are a predominant piece of Wisconsin's produce landscape. In fact, the United States is the leader in global production of cranberries, with Wisconsin producing more than 60% of the nation's total. This results in cranberries being identified as Wisconsin's number one fruit crop both in quantity and economic value.



DATCP image

In addition to being so plentiful, cranberries are also one of the more unique and influential commodities in Wisconsin. Originally, the fruit was referred to as "craneberries" due to its delicate blossom's resemblance to the head and bill of a Sandhill Crane. While not grown in water as often believed, cranberries *are* grown in bogs and marshes and are harvested through one of many flooding methods: hand combing in shallower waters, gentle tining, or beating. The berries contain small air pockets, allowing them to float to the surface of flooded beds where specialized equipment can then corral them. This process occurs in the fall, resulting in fresh cranberries being available at festivals and grocery stores from October through December.

Currently over 250 growers produce cranberries throughout central and northern Wisconsin. This includes a number of fresh-berry farmers, organic growers, and those producing their fruit for processing (i.e. juice, sweeten-dried, etc.). These farms, along with any other exempt operation, are still eligible for educational services and resources through Safe Wisconsin Produce (SWP). The program looks forward to interacting with and learning about all types of operations, which add a valuable diversity to the Wisconsin produce picture.

SWP TRIVIA:

There are 200 cranberries used in every can of cranberry sauce, 440 cranberries in a one-pound bag, and 4,400 cranberries in one gallon of juice!



Cranberries being harvested in October 2023 at James Lake Farms Inc. – Organic Cranberries in Three Lakes, WI

SWP Education and Outreach

Produce Safety Alliance (PSA) Trainings – Winter/Spring

Safely producing fruits and vegetables requires everyone involved in planting, growing, harvesting, packing, and transporting fresh produce to understand food safety practices. Please review our PSA training opportunities and plan to register yourself and/or staff for a date that works best for you. With questions, call (608) 224-4511 or email safeproduce@wi.gov.

Jan. 21, 2024

- Location: Kalahari Resort, Wisconsin Dells
- In-Person | No registration fee (WI residents)
- Held on first day of Growing Wisconsin Conference

Feb. 13, 2024

- Location: Wausau, WI
- In-Person | No registration fee (WI residents)

March 29, 2024

- Virtual | No registration fee (WI residents)

April 12, 2024

- Location: Madison, WI
- In-Person | No registration fee (WI residents)

April 23, 2024

- Location: Fennimore Produce Auction, Fennimore
- In-Person | No registration fee (WI residents)



Winter 2024 Highlighted Conference Season

Jan. 21-23, 2024

- **2024 Growing Wisconsin Conference** (formerly Wisconsin Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Conference)
- Location: Kalahari Resort, Wisconsin Dells
- SWP will have an education booth available, along with 1:1 Q&A sessions.

Feb. 6-8, 2024

- **2024 Grower Education Conference & Industry Show**
- Location: Holiday Inn Hotel/Convention Center, Stevens Point
- SWP will have an education booth available.

Feb. 22-24, 2024

- **2024 Marbledseed Organic Farming Conference (35th year)**
- Location: La Crosse Center, 300 Harborview Plaza, La Crosse
- SWP will have an education booth available.

Have new changes on your farm this year?

Get questions answered during 1:1 sessions with SWP staff.

Sign up at our conference booth (10-15 min. sessions) or email us at safeproduce@wi.gov to schedule a session.

Meet Your New Regulatory Team!

With fall upon us and winter quickly nearing, inspections for the primary 2023 growing season have now concluded. Inspections conducted during the 2023 growing season brought with them opportunity for growth, partnership, and further exploration into important Wisconsin commodities.

21 inspections were conducted between September 1 and October 13 (see Figure 1), during which time six new inspectional staff were trained or cross-trained. This group includes newly hired, full-time Safe Wisconsin Produce (SWP) inspector, Lisa Wipfli; the program's outreach and educational specialist, Jill Cholewa; three Manufactured Foods inspectors: Andrew Vetter, Caroline Paquin, and Jacob Zimmerman; and technical specialist, Stefan Boerboom. The diversity of this new inspectional group will bring forth more timely and comprehensive resources.

In addition to working with other Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection employees, SWP also had the opportunity to collaborate with Minnesota to conduct joint inspections at an operation with locations in states. This is part of a greater effort to ensure consistency across the nation and towards a commitment to coordinate for the benefit of growers.

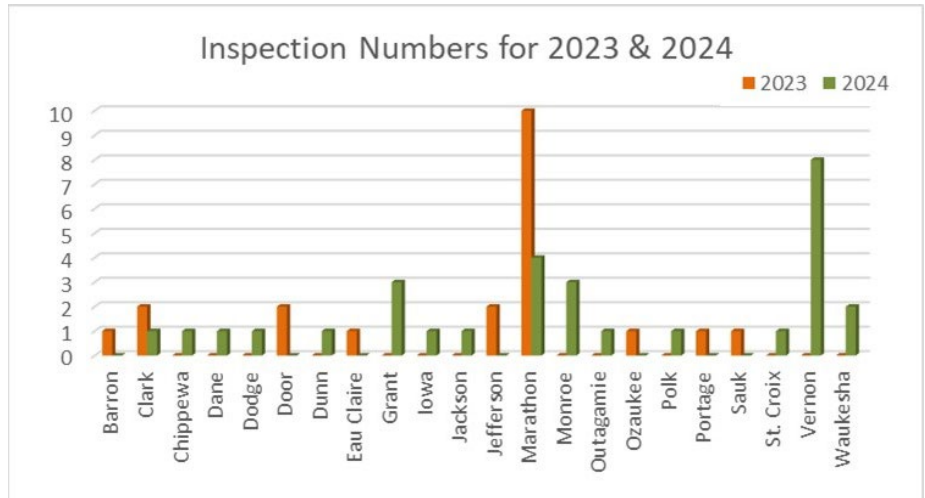





Figure 1

Moving forward, indoor growing operations may see inspections during the off-season, with traditional inspections picking back up in late April. Approximately 30 inspections will be conducted between now and June 30, 2024, with locations tentatively selected throughout the state (see Figure 1).

New Website Coming in 2024!

Our staff is currently in the process of restructuring our Safe Wisconsin Produce website! These updates will make it easier and quicker for visitors to the page to find the information they are looking for when they need it.

Here is a sneak peek of what we are working on:

-  ○ Planting the seeds for some new features
-  ○ Pruning our resource section
-  ○ Tidying up our storage sheds



Be sure to [visit our website](#) for updates over the months to come!

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Survey Updates and What to Plan for in 2024

As the agency responsible for administration of the Produce Safety Rule in the state, the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) is committed to helping all Wisconsin farms grow and sell produce that is safe to eat.



Surveys provide a timely annual means of demonstrating your Produce Safety Rule status, noting that all farms are referred to in some capacity within the rule. In addition, they offer the opportunity to sign up for educational services and request resources. Are you a produce farm that has never completed a SWP survey? [Contact us](#) for assistance.

In 2023, as part of our continuous improvement efforts, we initiated a shorter “renewal survey” for farms that had previously completed a full survey for the SWP program. Farms that responded to the renewal survey provided very positive feedback – thank you! Moving forward, more farms need to respond to the survey, and more thorough information needs to be provided when filling it out. A member of the SWP team may call or visit farms with incomplete or missing survey responses.

The End of the Temporary Exception for Qualified Exemptions

This exception applies to qualified exempt farms which shifted sales away from Qualified End-Users (QEU) to wholesale accounts due to the Public Health Emergency (PHE). In response to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a temporary exception to farms which had qualified exempt status prior to the emergency, allowing their sales to fall below the eligibility threshold (less than 50%) for sales to qualified end-users (QEU) while still maintaining exempt status. With the PHE declared expired as of May 11, 2023, the FDA announced that the temporary exception ends on November 7, 2023. What applicable farms need to do at this time is simply continue keeping documentation. For eligibility requirement 1 (below), no changes. For eligibility requirement 2, direct sales to QEU prior to January 1, 2024, will not affect your qualified exempt status. Sales after January 1, 2024 will restart as year one of the three-year average in next year’s summary of sales.

What are the Eligibility Requirements for Qualified Exempt Farms and How do I Demonstrate Them?

1. To be eligible, a farm’s **food sales*** must average less than \$610,182 (equivalent of \$500,000 adjusted for inflation) per year during the previous three years; **and**,
**includes sales of drinks, animal feed, processed and canned goods, grains, candy, chewing gum, dairy, eggs, meat, and produce.*
2. The average annual value of the farm’s direct sales of food to **qualified end-users*** must exceed (i.e. be greater than 50%) the average annual value of the farm’s food sales to all others during the previous three years.
**A qualified end-user is either (a) the consumer of the food (where the term consumer does not include a business), or (b) a restaurant or retail food establishment that is located in the same state or the same Indian reservation as the farm, or not more than 275 miles away.*

Once you determine your farm is eligible for a Qualified Exemption, you must meet modified requirements of the Produce Safety Rule including:

1. Prominently display the name of your farm and business address at the point of sale, such as on signage or labels.
2. Keep records demonstrating your farm’s eligibility:
 - a. keep dated sales records and location of any restaurant or retail establishments sold to,
 - b. complete and keep an annual review and summary of your sales – an example and template are available on the [safeproduce.wi.gov Resources page](https://safeproduce.wi.gov).

If you cannot demonstrate eligibility or meet the modified requirements, your farm will be in covered status and your operation will need to comply with the full requirements of the Produce Safety Rule. Visit the Safe Wisconsin Produce website at safeproduce.wi.gov and navigate to [Is Your Farm Covered By the PSR?](#) to learn about requirements for other exemptions.

Meet Produce Safety Advisory Council Member Steve Louis



Steve Louis poses with his family on their fruit farm in Richland Center.

In each newsletter, we feature one of our Produce Safety Advisory Council (PSAC) members. In this issue, our featured member represents produce farmers.

Steve Louis currently serves as vice chair of PSAC. Steve grew up on an apple orchard and dairy farm in southwest Wisconsin. He attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison and received degrees in horticulture and dairy science. Steve has managed packing operations and food safety programs at Oakwood Fruit Farm for over 15 years.

During a recent interview, Steve spoke about his background and shared some history about Oakwood Fruit Farm.

Below is a summary.

Do you feel your great-grandparents were innovative for growing fruit trees here in Wisconsin in 1904?

I think at the beginning, when farmers were setting up homesteads, my family saw a need for somebody to grow different plants to sell to new farmers starting out; then they moved into fruit growing. The farm moved from my great-grandfather to my grandfather, onto my father, and then myself. We are on the fifth generation now.

Regarding farm equipment and harvest processes: would you like to go back to the simpler way of doing things?

Yeah, there are some days it would be nice to go back to the simpler stuff, but for a lot of things, it's much easier, more accurate, and we get a lot better information to make decisions with now. There are certain days technology is great, when it's working; we hate it when it doesn't, right? Also, we've taken some of the back-breaking work out of it. I think we enjoy the ease of some of these new things, especially when we remember how the old ways were.

Do you have a specific memory of when you first felt connected to the farm and to the land?

So, our farm had two sectors up to the year 2000: an orchard and a dairy farm. Now, we are strictly a fruit farm. For me growing up with both, I was very involved with 4-H. We had projects and showed cattle at local and state fairs. Doing these things with other farm kids, those are some of my fondest memories. Learning that responsibility of getting my animal ready, I felt at that time "now I'm a farmer." Truly seeing a project from beginning to end, that was when I felt a connection. I've been fortunate to learn this trade from a young age by following others around our farm. With agriculture kids especially, they are really immersed in it their entire life growing up.

Was it a difficult decision separating from the dairy and choosing just one path?

It was difficult. My true love during my younger school days was dairy science. I really enjoyed the Holsteins. When I finished college, my focus those first 10 years was on the dairy side of the farm. But it was getting harder and harder to make consistent profits with our size of a couple hundred cows. My father was doing the orchard at that time, then we had a fire in 2010 and lost all our orchard facilities, our retail, everything. We had to decide what to do about rebuilding. My father was in his 70s, so learning all of that newer technology would have been hard. It was an extremely tough time for everyone, but after some time, and with everything being new, this made the transition go smoother.

My dad, at 86, still comes out here every day to help. He comes and goes as he wants. He really enjoys watching everything happen around the farm each day. My mother, she's 83, and also works in the commercial bakery every day.

What is the best knowledge you feel you have learned from your farming experiences?

Farmers are beginning to realize that we sometimes disrupt things in nature and specifically in our soil. I think we are more open to technology in better ways to “farm with the land.” Also, we’re learning how much soil health influences all things and we’re moving away from some of the harsher chemicals.

Can you share something about the industry that you feel is surprising or worrisome?

In our industry, there is so much hand labor. Labor has been an issue for years and it’s getting tougher. Because for us, with fresh fruit, we don’t have any automation. It’s got to be hand-picked. Getting that labor force is getting harder and harder.

Also, we basically are getting the same prices for wholesale apples as we got back in the ’80s. There’s constant push to be more efficient, but you can only push it so far, right? The difference between input costs and return for our product – it’s difficult. Unfortunately, this is what I feel has pushed a lot of smaller family farms out.



Oakwood Fruit Farm sells thousands of apple cider doughnuts every year.

Do you have a “remember when” family moment or event that you can recall?

Yes, I do. About four or five years before the fire, another orchard that bought cider from us to make their apple cider doughnuts with kept nudging us to sell our own doughnuts someday. Eventually we did, and they even helped us get started and shared a few tricks they had learned over the years.

At that time, we were talking about getting a bakery started and did put one in. I remember a family member saying, “Who in the heck is going to drive all the way out here to buy doughnuts?”

Funny thing is, we ended up tripling the bakery size in our current facility. Now we’re selling 20,000 dozens of apple cider doughnuts a year. So, we often recall this memory at family get-togethers, and say “look what happened, a lot of people are driving all the way out here to buy doughnuts!”

Is there a piece of advice that still echoes in your mind today from a family member?

Yes, I’d say from my grandfather. Even in his older adult years, he would come out to work around the orchard every day. He was always saying “if a job is worth doing, do it right.” He was a straight-forward person and kind of said it how it was. He instilled values of hard work, doing things right, and not cutting corners to everyone around him.

The PSAC is accepting nominations for two vacant positions on the council!

- 1) Nonprofit Education Institution Representative
- 2) Produce Business representative

To access a nomination form or learn more about the PSAC, please visit our website at safeproduce.wi.gov.

Contact us

As always, the Safe Wisconsin Produce team welcomes your feedback and engagement. If you would like to share your produce safety story to be featured in the next newsletter, or if you have other questions, please send us a note at safeproduce@wi.gov or call (608) 224-4511.

Resources

Organic Certification Cost Share Program Deadline Closes December 8!

Organic food processors and producers can apply for reimbursement of costs related to organic certification from USDA’s Organic Certification Cost Share Program. The deadline to apply is Friday, December 8, 2023. For more information or to download an application, visit <https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/AgDevelopment/OrganicFarmingAndFood.aspx>.

SWP Webpage Updates

[Safeproduce.wi.gov](https://safeproduce.wi.gov) contains tons of helpful information for growers. If there is something you would like to see on the website, let us know. The page is intended to be a resource for growers, buyers, and consumers, and we appreciate your perspective.