



Spring 2023

Safe Wisconsin Produce

Meet Robert Pierce: A Fixture of Urban Agriculture

Robert Pierce has been practicing urban agriculture in Wisconsin for nearly four decades. During that time, he began growing and providing organic produce to local communities on Madison’s south side.

In the last few decades, Pierce founded the essential Half-the-Forty-Acres Farm, which he still directs and operates. He has also continued to spread the benefits of his expertise as the market manager of South Madison Farmers in addition to his position as executive director of Neighborhood Food Solutions. Pierce said his desire to grow and distribute organic produce was cultivated by not only his personal health needs, but out of recognition that certain communities often lack access to affordable, natural, high-quality food. He touched upon that in the following interview with Safe Wisconsin Produce (SWP):

What does farming mean to you?

Farming means life; it’s what we have to do. We have to be able to grow good food and give people access to it without having to pay a high price. Farming means eating good.

Why did you get into farming, and what has kept you in the field after all these years?

I became allergic to a lot of different things they put in food and I couldn’t trust food grown by others, so I started growing it myself. To be able to eat organic food, as I’ve been all these years, you usually can’t afford it unless you’re rich.

What challenges exist with urban farming that may not exist with more traditional farming?

Access to land and being a black man.

What challenges exist for minorities that may not exist with other grower groups?

Access to land and loans. The American dream is cut off to us as minorities. They talk about it, but it doesn’t exist for us.

What specific challenges exist related to food safety (e.g., training, water use, sanitation, outbreak history, etc.)?

Lack of knowledge and an educational piece causes these challenges.



Pierce’s reputation as a prominent Wisconsin grower and community leader precedes him, which SWP employee Eleazar Wawa can attest to. He vividly remembers Pierce, to whom he and his neighbors endearingly referred to as “Big Papa,” enthusiastically distributing his produce in their south side neighborhood and sharing his urban farming techniques with the community. SWP is committed to collaborating with Pierce and other minority growers, including providing education and support to those who are seeking to practice urban agriculture in their communities.

SWP TRIVIA: What is the only food that can never go bad?
A: Honey is the only food that will last forever and never spoil. In fact, the oldest jar of honey ever found is believed to be 5,500 years old.

SWP's 2023 Inspection Preparations

Safe Wisconsin Produce (SWP) is now entering its sixth year of inspection services for produce farms across Wisconsin. Inspections are coordinated for farms conducting at least one covered activity (growing, harvesting, packing, or holding) on covered produce (i.e., fresh market produce eaten raw and not entirely intended for personal consumption or processing) and within a monetary range outlined by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). When scheduling a specific farm inspection, the FDA provides the following guidance:



Inspections should be scheduled during a time when farms are performing a covered activity on covered produce, with a focus on harvesting and/or packing. In addition, whenever possible, schedule inspections to focus on produce identified as priority commodities (e.g., onions, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, melons, leafy greens).

With the wide array of crops grown in Wisconsin, paired with a relatively short growing season for some of them, SWP cannot always prioritize harvesting and/or packing along with the FDA's selected commodities. Instead, it is critical that the SWP team utilize the entire season to the best of its ability. This means that while some farms will be selected as higher risk and inspected during the heart of the season, others may be inspected during the earlier growing or late holding times of year. With that, inspections for the 2023 growing season are already underway, having begun in April, and the team has been delighted with the response of growers, especially as there are a few changes to this year's process.

Updates for 2023 inspections

- Previously, only egregious observations were documented on the inspection report. Beginning this year, both egregious and significant observations will be noted.
- Multiple inspectors will be present for nearly every inspection this year as SWP works to train and cross-train staff for consistency and sustainability within the program.
- Post-harvest water requirements are now enforceable for large farms (more than \$500,000 in annual sales).
 - Handwashing, sanitation, washing produce, and/or cooling are some common examples of this category of water, which is required to have no detectable generic *E. coli* per 100 ml. Visit [Safe Wisconsin Produce's resources](#) for water testing labs and information on what records are needed to verify this standard.

Modified Requirements of the Produce Safety Rule

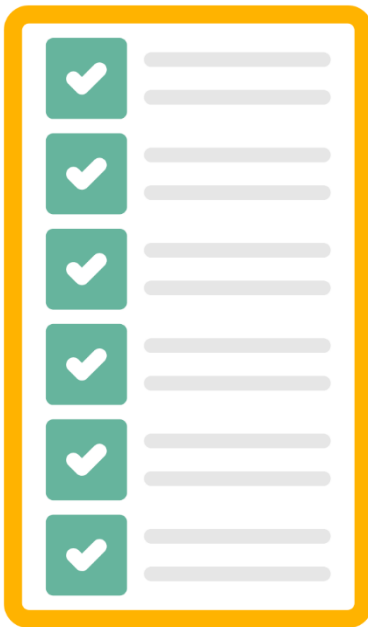


Farms identified as **qualified exempt** or **commodity exempt** (i.e., commodities intended for commercial processing) are still required to meet modified requirements.

Qualified exempt farms must keep dated sales receipts and adequate records demonstrating that they have performed an annual review of their farm's eligibility for a qualified exemption and prominently label produce with the farm name and complete business address on the food packaging. If there is no packaging label (e.g., selling loose produce at the farmers market), the farm must prominently and conspicuously display the farm name and complete business address at the point of purchase, either on a label, poster, sign, placard, or receipt.

Farms exempt for commercial processing of entire production must disclose in accompanying documentation provided to the processor/buyer that states that the produce is "not processed to adequately reduce the presence of microorganisms of public health significance."

Annual Survey Findings and Updates



Both full and renewal versions of the annual survey were sent in early February 2023, with an overall response rate of 18% as of early May. This compares to an average response rate of approximately 26% during the previous six years.

Of the farms sent the full survey to identify their status, 5% responded. Additionally, Safe Wisconsin Produce (SWP) staff regularly add farms to the survey distribution list during field days. Visits to these farms to identify their statuses are planned throughout the year.

Educational and Outreach Services Requested

Registry signups increased by a smaller percentage than anticipated (4%), possibly due to a typo in the print version of the renewal survey that mirrored the description for Grower Training. If you missed the opportunity to sign up to the registry to be visible by buyers and consumers, please send SWP a message and request to be added.

Improvements

While feedback about the renewal survey was positive, improvements are needed to ensure all questions are reviewed and completed (such as commodities, sales, seasons, activities), not just the obvious highlighted questions.

Registry improvements are expected in the coming year through the addition of a tool that will provide a regional overview to produce buyers of the landscape of farms and what the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety standards do to underpin the safety of their products through the various levels of participation in this program.

Why does the survey indicate that it is voluntary?

As a federal rule, it is operated with federal authority. Federal authority requires that each farm perform an evaluation of their status each year to determine if it has changed. It also requires that our program has standards to verify and maintain that information for each farm, and then plan our outreach and inspection around that. Responding to the survey provides that annual identification of farm status most efficiently. Without it, a visit may be necessary to clarify. If you received a survey and believe your farm is exempt based on any of the qualifications outlined in the rule — sales and market, not farming produce as defined in the rule, or the produce you farm is exempt — a response can save the necessity of a visit and ensure that the program is meeting the requirement of identifying the covered farms in the state. Having a complete picture results in better-served communities, with education and resources for consumer and buyer confidence and greater business longevity.

Are you unsure if you have taken the survey yet this year? [Take the survey on the SWP website.](#)

Happy Farewell, Dear Colleagues!

The Safe Wisconsin Produce (SWP) team bids farewell to **Bridget Peck**, **Amanda Miller**, and **Eleazar Wawa**. It has been great working with each of them. Great colleagues are those who believe in *we* rather than *me*. Their dedication, contributions, and exceptional skills made a tremendous impact on the SWP program.

We all share grateful memories and want to thank each of them for everything. Best wishes, and best of luck on their new ventures.



Meet Produce Safety Advisory Council Member Hsing-Yi Hsieh



Each newsletter we enjoy learning more about one of our Produce Safety Advisory Council (PSAC) members. This issue, our featured member represents grocers.

Hsing-Yi Hsieh serves as the director of food protection and regulatory affairs for Festival Foods, a privately-owned chain of grocery stores in Wisconsin. In this role, she is responsible for leading the execution of the company's food safety and quality programs as well as all regulatory compliance efforts across 41 retail locations. Under her leadership, Festival Foods was the recipient of the 2019 Food Marketing Institute's Food Safety Innovation Award. She holds a master's degree in food microbiology from Iowa State University and has more than 15 years of food safety experience in both public and private sectors. Hsing-Yi also earned the 2019 Progressive Grocers' Top Women in Grocery Award for her achievements.

Through a recent interview, Safe Wisconsin Produce had an opportunity to learn more about Hsing-Yi's background and personal interests. Here is a summary:

What person has made a big impact on your life and how?

My parents, especially my dad, have made me the person I am today. They taught me to work hard, to be humble, and to believe that there is nothing I cannot achieve in life. But above all, they taught me that family always comes first.

What is the most beautiful natural scene you have ever seen?

The Amazon rainforest for sure. I was lucky to spend eight weeks in the Venezuelan Amazon during a summer internship doing research at the local hospital and traveling to different tribes. The scenery and the starry skies are some of the most beautiful pictures I have in my memory.

If you had a time machine, where would you prefer to go and why?

I would probably go back in time so I can show appreciation and gratitude to all the people who touched my life, especially during my teenage years.

What is the most exciting part of your work?

Where do I start? I love how dynamic the retail industry is. I am constantly learning something new and applying my food safety knowledge to new processes and/or products that come to market on a daily basis. Having a continuous improvement mindset motivates me to come to work every day.

Also, I have many opportunities to collaborate with food safety professionals from different sectors and it is invigorating. I enjoy collaborating and sharing information with regulators, competitors, manufacturers, vendors, etc. It proves that food safety is not competitive and that we are all in this together to make our food supply safer and to protect our communities.

I am passionate about training and connecting with our associates in the stores. To talk about food safety is always the highlight of my day.

Do you have a favorite show or series that you like to binge watch?

I rarely go back to re-watch a show, so I can't say that there is a favorite one. Once I finish one, I try to find a new one. Currently, I am binge watching *Ted Lasso* and I love it.

What is your idea of a perfect day?

Any day at a beach would be a perfect day, with or without a fruity beverage.

What is the best piece of advice you have ever been given?


From my dad: "Find your authentic self and use it to your advantage for success." From my sixth-grade teacher: "The people you surround yourself with says a lot about you."

The PSAC is accepting nominations for one vacancy: a representative of a nonprofit education institution. Learn more and download the nomination form at safeproduce.wi.gov.

The Dos and Don'ts of Strawberry Production

By Brian R. Smith, Professor of Horticulture at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, UW-Madison, Division of Extension Commercial Fruit Crops Specialist

I grew up on a commercial strawberry farm in South Dakota. In my current role, I troubleshoot and make recommendations to commercial growers, and I have been conducting research in strawberry breeding and new cultivar (variety) development at University of Wisconsin-River Falls for 35 years. Listening to other growers, reading articles, making plenty of mistakes along the way, and learning from those mistakes allows me to relate the following tips to all levels of growers:

-  **Choose the right spot for your strawberries.** Full sun is ideal. Plant the strawberries in sandy loam soil, away from tree roots and near a water source.
-  **Do not plant where unacceptable crops, grass or pasture has been.** These areas can have white grubs that eat strawberry roots. Agronomic crops like corn and soybeans may have herbicide carryover residue that could hurt young strawberry plants. Vine crops like watermelons and muskmelons, along with potatoes, tomatoes, and eggplant can carry soil-borne diseases that may infect strawberries.
-  **Control perennial weeds before you plant.** Various versions of Roundup (glyphosate) should be sprayed in May when weeds are 6- to 8-in. tall. Let them stand two weeks and then plow or rototill before planting.
-  **Do not get your strawberry plants from friends or neighbors.** The longer that strawberries are grown in a location, the greater the likelihood that they will harbor insects or diseases. You do not want to get plants that already carry pests after all the work you will do to establish a planting.
-  **Improve your soil.** All crops benefit from soil improvement but especially strawberries, since they are so shallow-rooted (80% of root in top 6 inches of soil). Consider adding a good quality, well-cured compost that can improve water-holding capacity of the soil and retain nutrients while reducing soil-borne diseases flare ups.
-  **Do not forget common pests the first year and beyond.** Common insects the first year include aphids, leafrollers, and leafhoppers. Second-year insects to watch for include clipper weevil, tarnished plant bug, and thrips. Typical fruit diseases are botrytis gray mold and leather rot. Common plant diseases are leaf spots, leaf scorch, Verticillium wilt, red stele, and black root rot complex. Ask your state extension fruit specialist, county agent, or local master gardener for appropriate control measures.
-  **Conduct soil and tissue tests to confirm plants get right nutrients.** There are soil-testing labs out there that can test soil to ensure it has correct pH and level of essential macro/micronutrients needed for growth. Once plants are growing in July or August, tissue samples can be taken to see if plants have correct nutrients.
-  **Do not let runners/daughter plants grow unsupervised.** Typical matted row systems that June-bearing strawberries are planted in allow for rows to fill in with daughter/runner plants to about 18-in. wide. You can help daughter plants root in the right spot by making sure the plants peg or root down about 4 in.- to 6-in. apart.
-  **Choose correct strawberry cultivar (variety) to plant.** Most people choose June-bearing cultivars, as they tend to be the best adapted to our climate. For early-ripening cultivars, 'Annapolis' works well for the northern part of state, along with 'Wendy' variety. 'Honeoye' and 'Brunswick' are good early-midseason candidates, 'Cavendish' and 'Jewel' as mid to mid-late season, and 'Valley Sunset' for late season.
-  **Do not narrow rows too late in the fall.** Once you have achieved desired row width, there will probably be many excess runners. Do the final row narrowing with a rototiller, multivator, hoe, or shovel no later than September 25. This is an invasive process, so it helps remaining strawberries recover from stress before winter.





Plant early and at the correct depth. Strawberry plants should be planted as soon as your soil can be worked without ruining soil structure. Sandy soils can be planted in April, and heavier clay-type soils two to three weeks later. Do not work soil when it is too wet or compaction results. Plant spacings should be about 15-in. apart within rows, and distance between rows range from 38-in. to 40-in. apart.



Do not cover/mulch your strawberries too late or too early. People try to cover strawberries with straw mulch in late October when temperatures start to drop. Strawberries will still initiate flower buds in their crowns for next year's crop any time temperatures above 40-45° F, so October is too early. Watch for low temperatures. Strawberries can sustain damage with three to four nights of 15°F, however, an isolated night or two down to 10°F will generally not be a problem. Thanksgiving weekend is a typical time to cover strawberries. When mulching, select a fluffy straw-like rye, barley, Sudan grass, or wheat straw.



Fertilize, water, and weed on a regular schedule the first growing season. Every two to three weeks, put on the equivalent of 25 lbs. actual N/acre (1 oz./110 ft²). Fertilize with higher nitrogen amounts in mid-late August and mid-late September (about 45 to 50 lbs. actual N/acre). Depending on rainfall, water about 1 inch per week. Strawberries cannot compete with weeds. Cultivate/hoe before weeds even emerge and your weeding will be far easier.



Do not uncover too early in the spring. Most commercial growers uncover early-mid April if they have means to combat frost during blossoming time, and most use sprinkler irrigation. A more scientific guideline is to wait until soil temperatures at 4- to 5-in. depth reach 40°F for three consecutive days. Plants can tolerate light freezes, but once there is any hint of flower buds growing out of the crown, direct action will be needed to protect against temps at or below 32°F. At this point, there will be no fruit set due to freezing damage to sensitive flower/fruit parts.



Remove all flowers and fruit first year. June-bearing strawberry plants should concentrate on vegetative growth and runnering the first year, so remove any flowers or buds immediately to prevent fruit set and severe stunting of plants.



Do not keep your planting too long. Even commercial growers want to keep fields longer than they should, especially if everything looks good. The longer a strawberry planting is kept, the longer it will take to successfully establish new strawberry plants back in that area. Diseases and insect populations build up over years, nutrients get depleted, and it may take a long time to get that land back in condition to have a thriving new planting. People typically cringe when I suggest no more than two to three harvest years of any planting, but that is the best scenario. Grain crops, peas, beans, sweet corn, and carrots are acceptable crops to rotate. Any particular site should be free of strawberries for at least three to four years before attempting new planting.

Have questions? Contact Brian Smith at brian.r.smith@uwrf.edu or by phone at (651) 492-2178.

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

Wisconsin Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program

Last fall, DATCP signed a cooperative agreement with USDA to create the Wisconsin Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program. This program aims to strengthen local and regional food systems; support underserved, small Wisconsin farmers; and distribute fresh, nutritious foods to underserved communities. [Learn more.](#)

SWP webpage updates

[Safeproduce.wi.gov](https://safeproduce.wi.gov) is being updated with new events and 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 alike, and your voice gives us the best perspective.

Funding for this publication was made possible, in part, by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration through grant PAR-21-174. The views expressed in written materials or publications, and by speakers and moderators, do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; nor does any mention of trade names, commercial practices or organization imply endorsement by the U.S. government.