

SAFELY HARVESTING AND HANDLING PRODUCE FOR DONATION TO FOOD PANTRIES AND FOOD BANKS

- **Harvest produce just-in-time.** If possible, pick produce in the morning for morning or early afternoon distribution.
- **Pick some items before they are fully ripe.** This mainly applies to tomatoes, but cantaloupe or other fruits that ripen after they are picked are included too. This will help extend the shelf life of the produce since it may take some time for it to reach its final destination.
- **Handle produce gently.** Bruises, nicks, and cuts all cause the produce to spoil faster. When picking, place items gently into the bucket or box. Don't throw or drop produce. Consider packing produce in boxes in the field to reduce handling injury.
- **Harvest during the coolest part of the day, usually mornings.** Also, harvest produce when it is dry, if possible.
- **Wash produce if needed.** If the produce is dirty, consider giving it a rinse with potable water (from a municipal or tested supply). After rinsing, set the produce out on screened tables in a shaded or covered area to drip dry. Produce should only come into contact with disinfected surfaces (no wood). **AVOID washing tomatoes, cabbage, okra, summer squash, berries, and peas. The extra moisture can promote spoilage.**
- **Keep produce cool.** After picking and possibly washing, keep produce in some type of refrigeration unit set between 32 and 40 degrees F. If that is not possible, keep produce in the shade or a cool room until it can be transported. Some items including green beans, cucumbers, eggplant, okra, peppers, potatoes, summer squash, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and watermelons can handle warmer temperatures (ideal storage temps between approximately 40 and 50 degrees). These items can tolerate more time outside of the refrigerator, especially if they will be distributed quickly.
- **Wash and disinfect harvest bins, buckets, and anything that comes into contact with produce frequently.** Dirt and grime can transfer bacteria from produce to people. Use water (hot water if available), soap, a disinfectant (dilute household bleach to 50 ppm or 1.5 tablespoons per 5 gallons of water), and a good brush to keep containers and surfaces clean. To help keep harvest bins clean, avoid setting them on bare soil and stacking them when they are dirty.