

Recovering from a flood.

Q&A 02-18-2017.

My garden was flooded in the past storm. Is it safe to eat the vegetables from my garden?

You are right to question the safety of eating produce from your garden after a flood. Flooding, according to research done by North Carolina State University, can introduce pathogens to your garden; including E. coli, Salmonella, Hepatitis A and norovirus. “Foodborne illness can affect anyone, but some groups including the very young, the very old, and those with weakened immune systems, are at greater risk and can suffer serious lifelong complications and even death.

Unfortunately, some forms of these pathogens are very aggressive and can cause severe illness, even in healthy young adults.” states the Food Safety Tips for Your Edible Home Garden publication from UC Davis. The risk of having these pathogens introduced to your garden increases if you have livestock or pet areas nearby or a compost pile in your garden.

With this said, you want to be very cautious with eating vegetables from a garden after a flood. Food safety experts say that if you don’t plan to harvest your root vegetables for at least another 4 to 6 weeks, and your garden does not flood again, it should be safe to eat root vegetables from your garden. As long as soil temperatures are above 50 degrees bacteria in the soil breaks down the e coli bacteria, the most common concern of contamination in flood waters.

However, if you plan to harvest before that time root vegetables should be washed and thoroughly cooked. Greens, flowers such as cauliflower and broccoli, and other vegetables that came directly into contact with the flood waters should not be eaten raw even after 6 weeks. Leafy vegetables can uptake the bacteria into their vascular system and no amount of washing will remove the pathogen. If the vegetable cannot be thoroughly cleaned and well-cooked, not just lightly cooked or blanched, they should be composted as the risk of you becoming sick from eating them is high.

When not flooded most produce harvested from the garden is wholesome and free of microbes that cause illness. But it is still a good idea to always practice food

safety when gardening and harvesting vegetables and fruit. Simple activities such as washing hands, harvest containers and tools before harvesting, only watering with potable water, and not allowing pets into the garden area during the growing and harvest season can reduce chances of food borne illness. The publication Food Safety Tips for Your Edible Home Garden found on the UC Davis Food Safety website is a good guide to follow for insuring pathogen free harvest.

For more information on this subject visit the UC Davis Food Safety page for Backyard Farming at http://ucfoodsafety.ucdavis.edu/Backyard_Farming/ And read the food safety publication Recovering From A Storm.