

# COVID-19 Best Practice Information: Connecting Consumers with Local Food

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## Background

- The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic hampered traditional farming and threatened food supply chains raising concerns about widespread food shortages and price increases. In response, countries, cities, and private citizens began to expand local food production through family and community gardens to supplement forecasted disruption to supply chains.
- Some farmers have modified their business and outreach practices, and other organizations and state governments are enhancing their programs in support of food security.
- The following is a list of key findings and considerations for jurisdictions and communities regarding ongoing COVID-19 pandemic operations across the country. These are best practices for consideration and do not constitute and should not be considered as guidance in any way.<sup>1</sup>

## Key Considerations

- The coronavirus outbreak is not the first time that concerns about food security have led to more localized production. During World War I, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson asked Americans to plant "Victory Gardens" to prevent food shortages. The effort continued during World War Two, with vegetable gardens in backyards and schoolyards, on unused land, and even the front lawn of the White House.<sup>2</sup>
- Urban farming allows residents to convert unused spaces, such as rooftop parking lots, warehouses, and vacant lots into community gardening spaces that can help communities mitigate the consequences of the global food supply chain disruption.
- While searching for reliable access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals have turned to alternate grocery venues, such as farmers' markets and direct farm sales.

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<sup>1</sup> This document contains references and links to non-federal resources and organizations. This information is meant solely for informational purposes and is not intended to be an endorsement of any non-federal entity by FEMA, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. government.

<sup>2</sup> n.d. Smithsonian Libraries, Gardening for the Common Good: Victory Gardens, <https://library.si.edu/exhibition/cultivating-americas-gardens/gardening-for-the-common-good>



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# Lessons Learned Related to COVID-19 Connecting Consumers with Local Food

## Supplemental Food Production Through Community Farming

- **Potential Best Practice:** Singapore has announced new local food production efforts, including a plan to turn car park rooftops in public housing estates into urban farms. Authorities announced a \$30 million grant to ramp up local production of eggs, leafy vegetables, and fish over the next six to 24 months.<sup>3</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** Concerned that Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania families are feeling the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis, city council members have proposed the idea of city-owned designated vacant lots for families to farm their own food.<sup>4</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** Indoor, urban vertical farms are in demand worldwide. Indoor farming consists of columns of vertically stacked growing trays in large warehouses. Using artificial light, algorithm-controlled water and climate settings, and automated soil and nutrient monitoring, plants grow much faster than in outdoor farms and without pesticides. The produce is harvested with fewer workers than a typical farm needs, and the growing season never ends.<sup>5</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** Feed stores across the U.S. have reported an increasing number of people are buying seed for their gardens to plant vegetables.<sup>6</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** In South Central Los Angeles, California, Ron Finley (a.k.a. “Gangsta Gardener”), recently launched a MasterClass that teaches city dwellers how to turn parkways, vacant lots, and other unused spaces into fruitful community gardens.<sup>7</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** The Berks History Center in Reading, PA launched “Berks History for Victory,” a digital resource that provides historical context for gardening and tips for at-home food production. The project includes a “little seed library” stocked with free seed packets. The center handed out 250 kick-start kits to Berks residents with vegetable plants and bilingual educational pamphlets.<sup>8</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** The Master Gardener program at the Colorado State University Extension has registered almost 400 home and community gardens in Colorado in its “Grow & Give” project. The project provides resources to help individuals and communities grow food and donate extra produce locally.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 2020 Reuters, Singapore ramps up rooftop farming plans as virus upends supply chains,

<https://news.trust.org/item/20200408062120-9zn5k/>

<sup>4</sup> 2020 Pittsburgh’s Action News, Urban farming proposed to address Pittsburgh food needs in face of COVID-19 impact,

<https://www.wtae.com/article/urban-farming-proposed-to-address-pittsburgh-food-needs-in-face-of-covid-19-impact/32149185#>

<sup>5</sup> 2020 Axios, Vertical farms see surge in demand for greens grown indoors, <https://www.axios.com/vertical-farms-demand-coronavirus-29b6b2b9-11ca-4a84-b6e2-f43749d4d968.html>

<sup>6</sup> 2020 Texoma’s, Coronavirus triggers a home farming boom, <https://www.texomashomepage.com/news/local-news/coronavirus-triggers-a-home-farming-boom/>

<sup>7</sup> 2020 Complex, A Soil Soldier: Ron Finley on Cultivating Coronavirus Life Skills and Erasing Food Prisons,

<https://www.complex.com/life/2020/05/ron-finley-gangster-gardener-masterclass-interview>

<sup>8</sup> 2020 Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, Growing Community: Berks History Center Responds to COVID-19

through Gardening, <https://march.rutgers.edu/growing-community-berks-history-center-responds-to-covid-19-through-gardening>

<sup>9</sup> 2020 Master Gardener Colorado State University Extension, Grow & Give Modern Victory Garden Project,

<https://cmg.extension.colostate.edu/grow-give/>

- **Potential Best Practice:** Governments in the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany and France have appealed to unemployed workers and students to work as seasonal produce pickers to fill staffing gaps on farms.<sup>10</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** Cornell, NY Cooperative Extension offices are distributing free hand sanitizer and face coverings to farm businesses to help insure clean, safe food production, harvesting and distribution.<sup>11</sup>

## Community Food Access

- **Potential Best Practice:** Farmers' markets can serve as an essential service, allowing communities access to fresh foods in an open-air environment. Farmers' markets are adapting safety protocols by accommodating online orders and reorganizing distribution to allow for drive-through pick-up options. At the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture (CUESA) markets, sellers adhere to the following guidelines to protect the community:<sup>12</sup>
  - Ensure social distancing of six feet throughout the market
  - Reinforce health and safety precautions
  - Suspend product sampling and self-serve options
  - Provide handwashing stations
  - Eliminate café seating
- **Potential Best Practice:** Farmers who sell meat, dairy, fruits, and vegetables directly to consumers have noticed a spike in orders since the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak. As restaurants and schools scale back contracts, some farmers have found success in adjusting their business model to incorporate direct sales to consumers.<sup>13 14</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** Farmers who have lost their traditional markets due to COVID-19 school, university restaurant and hotel closures are using websites and social media platforms to connect with consumers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 2020 World Economic Forum, How farms are getting close to consumers in the pandemic,

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/farms-farming-food-closer-consumers-pandemic-covid/>

<sup>11</sup> 2020 Cornell Cooperative Extension Ulster County, Supporting Farms: NYS Clean,

<http://ulster.cce.cornell.edu/environment/emergency-preparedness/covid-19-resources/supporting-farms>

<sup>12</sup> 2020 Center for Urban Education About Sustainable Agriculture (CUESA), COVID-19 Response and Market Updates,

<https://cuesa.org/covid19response>

<sup>13</sup> 2020 Politico, Coronavirus has more Americans turning directly to farms for food,

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/31/coronavirus-demand-for-local-farms-157538>

<sup>14</sup> 2020 Sun Sentinel, Fear in the aisles: Amid coronavirus, shoppers ditch grocery stores for South Florida farms.

<https://www.sun-sentinel.com/coronavirus/fl-ne-coronavirus-grocery-store-paranoia-farms-20200402-5flvoviw25dr3b6fcrrokypa3a-story.html>

<sup>15</sup> 2020 American Farm Bureau FB News, More Farmers Connecting with Local Buyers via Websites and Social Media,

<https://www.fb.org/news/more-farmers-connecting-with-local-buyers-via-websites-and-social-media>

- **Potential Best Practice:** Hatcheries have reported a spike in interest from people wanting to raise chickens at home to ensure a reliable source of eggs.<sup>16</sup> In addition, mental health experts suggest that chickens can be a great source of emotional support and that caring for and feeding chickens provides a reassuring sense of purpose and routine.<sup>17</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** During the pandemic nonprofit organizations that support farmers quickly worked to adapt their websites to help connect farmers and consumers, provide information on starting a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program to sell food boxes to consumers on a subscription basis and share information on funding sources and successful farming techniques.<sup>18</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** Purdue University Extension developed “A Guide to Alternative Delivery Systems for Local Producers During the COVID-19 Pandemic” that provides options for farmers to offer products to consumers while practicing social distancing. Examples include off-farm pickups, pop-up stands and connecting with local grocers and food co-ops.<sup>19</sup>

For additional information on food safety and the supply chain, please see: [Commercial Truckers & the Supply Chain](#) and [Food Store](#) best practices.

Topics for the “Best Practices” series are generated from crowd sourced suggestions. Have an idea? Let us research it! Organizations and individuals can e-mail best practices or lessons learned to [fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov).

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<sup>16</sup> 2020 NPR, 'We Are Swamped': Coronavirus Propels Interest In Raising Backyard Chickens For Eggs  
<https://www.npr.org/2020/04/03/826925180/we-are-swamped-coronavirus-propels-interest-in-raising-backyard-chickens-for-egg>

<sup>17</sup> 2020 Mental Health Awareness Week: Therapy chickens help to calm psychiatric patients and staff at Littlebrook Hospital in Dartford <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/dartford/news/therapy-chickens-combat-anxiety-at-mental-health-hospital-227631/>

<sup>18</sup> 2020 yes!, Magazine, COVID-19 Sparks a Rebirth of the Local Farm Movement,  
<https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2020/05/21/coronavirus-food-local-farm-movement/>

<sup>19</sup> 2020 Purdue University Extension, A Guide to Alternative Delivery Systems for Local Producers During the COVID-19 Pandemic, <https://extension.purdue.edu/article/36645>