Flooded Produce from Personal Gardens

If flood waters have covered a garden, some produce will be unsafe to eat, especially if it is close to harvest. The safety of unharvested fruits and vegetables will depend on:

1. kind of produce
2. maturity of produce at the time of flooding
3. time of year flooding occurred; possible recurrence of flood in same week
4. severity of flooding (depth of water and silt)
5. duration of flooding
6. bacterial content of floodwater
7. likelihood of contamination from sewage or other bacterial contaminants

**Immature produce**

In general, fruits and vegetables which are more than 2 weeks away from maturity at the time of flooding should be safe to eat by the time they are ready for harvest. For additional safety, disinfect produce (see below) and cook it before eating. However, if the flooding involved raw sewage or livestock wastes, there is a high probability of contamination, and the produce should not be consumed or marketed to others.

**Mature produce**

Unless flooding was light and there is no danger of bacterial contamination from floodwater, avoid using fruits and vegetables that were mature or ready for harvest at the time of flooding. Some fruits and vegetables are more susceptible than others to bacterial contamination.

1. *Leafy vegetables* such as lettuce, cabbage, mustard, kale, collards, spinach, swiss chard, celery, and fleshy vegetables and berry fruits such as tomatoes, cucumbers, summer squash, strawberries, and peppers would be highly susceptible to bacterial contamination.  
      
   Don't pick contaminated vegetables even if they look fresh and clean. Bacterial contamination is not visible to the eye.

Silt and other contaminants might be imbedded in the leaves, petioles, stems or other natural openings of fleshy structures, and could be difficult to remove or completely disinfect.

1. Root, bulb and tuber crops such as beets, carrots, radishes, turnips, onions, and potatoes would be less susceptible to bacterial contamination. Wait at least two weeks before harvesting. Disinfect these vegetables, peel, and cook them thoroughly before eating.
2. Produce with a protected fruit or impervious outer skin such as melons, eggplant, or winter squash should be washed and disinfected before the outer shell, skin or husk is removed. Leave in the field as long as possible where the rain and sun can help decontaminate the produce. Then shell, peel, or husk the produce, and cook it if possible.
3. Sweet corn that is above the level of the flood water and immature at the time of flooding should be safe, but still should be cooked before consuming.

**Disinfecting measures**

Thoroughly wash and disinfect any produce before eating.

Remember, there may be other sources of contamination in the garden other than flood water including bird and wildlife waster, and dogs and cats.

1. Wash in a strong detergent solution with a clean scrub brush. Remove all silt.
2. Immerse produce for 15 to 20 minutes in a chlorine solution. Household bleaches contain from 2% to 6% chlorine. The amount of bleach to add to water depends on the percentage chlorine it contains:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| % chlorine in bleach | Volume of bleach to add to 1 quart water | Volume of bleach to add to 1 gallon water |
| 2% | ¾ Tablespoon | 2 Tablespoons |
| 4% | 1 teaspoon | 1 Tablespoon |
| 6% | ½ teaspoon | ¾ Tablespoon |

1. Rinse thoroughly with safe drinking water.
2. Peel, if possible, and cook thoroughly before eating. Refer any specific questions to health authorities or your county Extension office.
3. Be consider and don’t donate produce that you believe has any potential for having been contaminated to local food banks where the consumer may not be aware of the procedures for disinfecting it.