Our garden was covered by flood waters. Can we eat the vegetables that were growing?

If flood waters have covered a garden, most produce will be unsafe to eat. The safety of unharvested fruits and vegetables will depend on:

• Kind of produce
• Maturity of produce at the time of flooding
• Time of year flooding occurred
• Severity of flooding (depth of water and silt)
• Duration of flooding
• Bacterial content of floodwater
• Likelihood of contamination from sewage or other bacterial contaminants

In general, fruits and vegetables that were immature at the time of flooding should be safe to eat by the time they are ready to harvest. This would include vegetables in the blossom or pre-blossom stage. For additional safety, wash thoroughly and cook before eating.

Unless flooding was light and there is no danger of bacterial contamination from floodwater, do not use fruits and vegetables that were ready for harvest at the time of flooding. Some fruits and vegetables are more susceptible than others to bacterial contamination.

• Leafy vegetables (such as lettuce, cabbage, mustard, kale, collards, spinach, Swiss Chard, and celery), fleshy vegetables (such as tomatoes, summer squash, and peppers), and berry fruits (such as strawberries) are highly susceptible to bacterial contamination. Silt and other contaminants may be imbedded in the leaves, petioles, stems, or other natural openings of fleshy structures and can be difficult to remove. Do not use if mature when flooded. In the case of strawberries, do not use any fruit that is set on, regardless of maturity.

• Root, bulb, and tuber crops (such as beets, carrots, radishes, turnips, onions, and potatoes) are less susceptible to bacterial contamination. Wash with scrubbing, peel, and cook them before eating. Because radishes and green onions are not cooked, they should not be used. Green onions can be left to grow into a mature bulb for later use.

• Produce with a protected fruit or impervious outer skin (such as peas, melons, eggplant, sweet corn, or winter squash) should be washed thoroughly before the outer shell, skin, or husk is removed. Then shell, peel, or husk the produce and cook before eating.

For more information check these Iowa State University Extension resources.

Answer Line
800-262-3804
www.extension.iastate.edu/answerline

Distribution Center
515-294-5247
www.extension.iastate.edu/store

Horticulture
www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu

HortLine
515-294-3108

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References
Safe Handling of Fruits and Vegetables, Produce Marketing Association;
“Always wash produce, so quality won’t go down the drain.” News Release, Agricultural Information Service, Penn State’s College of Agricultural Sciences; The Extension Agents Handbook for Emergency Preparation and Reponse, Texas Ag Extension Service and Hazard Reduction and Recovery Center; Ohio State University Extension.

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