Today on across the fence Vermonters are going straight to the farm to get the freshest local food and our farmers are taking steps to enhance their already strong reputation for producing safe healthy food. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I'm Judy Simpson. Nationwide things like salmonella or E coli raise issues about the safety of our food. While Vermont is already well known for producing quality foods that are safe UVM extension is helping farmers stay on top of new food safety regulations in the best practices. This is a particularly important issue for farms involved and agri-tourism the ones that are open to the public. In just a moment will visit such a farm but first I want to introduce two guests. Lisa chase is a natural resources specialist with UVM extension and director of the Vermont tourism data center. Londa Nwadike is an extension food safety specialist based in Central Vermont. Welcome to both of you. Food safety of course is a critical issue for the farm. Lisa maybe you could start by talking about farms that are open to the public and the significance of food safety?

Lisa.: Food safety is important on any farm but it's especially important on those farms that are open to the public. Whether it's a you pick operation farm stands whether they're having harvest festivals or maple open house weekend. Farms are even having cafes and restaurants. There's a lot of creative ways that Vermont farmers are opening their farms and it's a terrific opportunity in terms of education and also for our economy. Agri-tourism and culinary tourism have been growing rapidly however any time you have more people around food you need to be more aware of the best practices for food safety.

Judy.: Because people are obviously bringing in germs and anything else so you have to watch that. Is there a way to measure the significance of agri-tourism to Vermont?

Lisa.: That's a very good question. The best most recent data we have is from 2007. It's a bit dated now and that's from the national agricultural statistics service senses. This is back in 2007 direct sales from agricultural products and agri-tourism brought in over $24,000,000 just in that year. So it significant however people are expecting that quite a bit of growth has happened in the last five years and there are some studies underway now and they'll be a new sense it's in 2012. So we're looking forward to seeing how much it has grown because it's been one of the bright spots for our economy and the last few years.

Judy.: This is a great opportunity for local farms but with any opportunity comes challenges and Wanda what are the challenges for farms who prepare foods and open doors to visitors?

Londa.: Opening your farm to visitors does open a whole new realm of risk management issues and risk management challenges especially in food safety. The types of risk vary depending on the type of
farm but all farms should make sure that they're doing as many good food safety practices as they can to make sure that their products that they're producing are not going to be making people sick. For example if you're maple producer like Lisa talked about. Maple producer should be making sure that their food does not have a lot of chemicals into it. Those chemicals could come from residues of cleaning solutions that they're using to clean their system. Meat and poultry processors should be concerned about reducing microbial contamination from things like equalize salmonella listeria. Specialty food processors those making salsa or chips or different things like that have to be concerned about microbials as well as chemicals and physical contaminants so they have a lot to be thinking about. Produce growers and especially you pick operations really need to consider how they can reduce the possibility of microbial contamination to their products.

Judy.: One of the most common ways for the general public as you mentioned are the you pick operations which are really popular for berries or anything else apples vegetables. Across the fence's is Keith Silva is going to take us to East Thetford now to see one of the farms that are embracing food safety for the public.

((p-Cedar Circle))

At Cedar Circle Farm in East Thetford … there are placards for fresh lettuce and crisp cucumbers … ‘garden variety’ signs to be sure, with one exception … a notice asking visitors to please wash their hands. It’s one of many ways that this farm is raising awareness about food safety.

Megan Baxter /Cedar Circle Farm: “We realized that the most important thing whether it was us selling food to someone or you buying food from someone else is washing your hands. It’s the stuff that your mother tells you.”

Megan Baxter is the production manager at Cedar Circle Farm. A few years ago she took the initiative to create a food safety manual for farm employees.

Baxter: “Food safety measures were sort of ramped up three years ago after the big spinach and peanut butter scares. We were concerned that legislation was going to be passed that would sort of exclude our current policies and we’d have to play catch up and we’d rather have been on top of it than scramble to get things done.”

Baxter’s pro-active approach to food safety has set a standard for other farms to follow.

Ginger Nickerson / UVM Extension: “What’s great about what Cedar Circle has done is that they knew that food safety was becoming an increasing concern amongst consumers.”

Ginger Nickerson is the UVM Extension’s Good Agricultural Practices coordinator. She believes that Cedar Circle Farms commitment to food safety has far reaching effects both on and off the farm.

Nickerson: “they’ve always been paying attention to plant pathogens and tomato blight and things like that. They did an assessment on their own farm looking at where the possible places of where contamination could happen on this farm and then implementing strategies to reduce the risk of any contamination.”

Baxter: “There’s multiple very sort of personal reasons for doing this. One is that we want our produce to last longer. We don’t want to throw things away after it’s been harvested. So, if things are harvested and processed, and stored correctly their shelf life is much longer. So we actually bring a better and cleaner product to market which people are impressed by; other farmers say, ‘Wow! Your carrots are really clean. How did you get them like that?’ We triple wash just about everything that goes to market either in our stand or to wholesale or to farmers markets.”
Cedar Circle also gives customers the option of pick-your-own strawberries and blueberries. ‘You-pick’ is a great experience for the public, but it presents a big challenge to the farm’s food safety policies.

Baxter: “It’s the one thing we can’t control. That’s my other problem with the you-pick it was the one hole in our perfect system for keeping food clean before it went to a customer so that’s the real reason why I implemented you-pick policies just to be a safety net to cover up that one gap in what we were doing.”

In addition to washing their hands before picking … customers are also asked to leave their four-legged-friends at home.

Baxter: “People think of farms as being public spaces where they can walk their animals at leisure. And we don’t unfortunately have really any shaded parking either so we’ve been encouraging people on our website to just not bring your dog which makes sense you don’t bring your dog everywhere necessarily. Yes, dogs. That’s the number one thing that people get upset about, hand washing nobody complains about. I think, maybe thirty forty years ago they would have, but I think we live in a more germaphobic culture than we use to and people are used to washing their hands.

Janet Cathey VO: “I’ve never been asked to wash my hands before berry picking before.”

Janet Cathey is a long-time Cedar Circle farm customer. When she was asked to wash her hands before she went berry-picking she was happy to abide by the farm’s policies.

Janet Cathey // Randolph, VT: “Anybody could have something on their hands that isn’t clean. So it makes sense to have your hands washed; and then I realized that I could be leaving something on the berries for someone else to get so, I understand about being considerate.”

For Cathey … picking the berries is only half the fun of visiting the farm.

Cathey: “I love picking berries and I love eating them while I’m picking them and I love thinking about things I’m going to make with them when I’m done and it’s just a nice thing to do on a beautiful day.

U-pick operations, roadside stands, and weekly farmers markets provide customers with an experience that’s no different from any other recreational or tourist activity. Farmers engaged in this kind of ‘agri-tourism’ need to provide customers with an experience that’s both unique and familiar.

Ben Amsden //Plymouth State University: “Things like the hand washing stations, like the signage that actually helps people become more confident when they come to the farm they say, ‘O.K., good! This is a place sort of fit in, I see this’ and that kind of lines up with other tourism experiences they have in other sectors non-agriculture tourism experiences where there accustomed to signs, accustomed to being told where to go and what to do and not that every farm experience is regimented like that or not that anybody dreams of keeping people, you know, on the straight and narrow, so-to-speak, but from a tourism perspective it just sort of helps situate people, helps locate people within those expectations.”

Lynn Zanardi-Blevins//UVM Extension: “I absolutely encourage people to get out on farms and have interactions with nature.”

Lynn Zanardi-Blevins is a doctor who worked at the United States Center for Disease Control before working with UVM Extension’s Center for Sustainable Agriculture. She warns that no one is immune to food-borne illness and that newer or variant strains of bacteria like E. coli are of increasing concern. Children and the elderly are at the greatest risk … which means even stricter vigilance must be paid to food that comes directly from the field to the plate.
Zanardi-Blevins: “People are definitely eating more fresh and whole foods than ever before and this is great news because fresh and whole foods are healthier for you than processed foods are. The downside is that there’s no heat step that would kill a pathogen on a contaminated piece of produce and this is why it’s so important to prevent contamination of produce on a farm because it’s much more difficult to decontaminate down the line in the kitchen.”

Ginger Nickerson/UVM Extension: “So it’s just contributing to a culture where people are aware of food safety and their sharing that awareness with one another and so in my mind what Cedar circle has done is really because it’s important part of them. If consumers are coming to a you-pick farm for this fabulous experience to eat fresh locally grown produce and have some time on the farm they have to be aware that they have a role in being aware in food safety in some very simple practices.”

Be it ‘You-pick’ or ‘they-pick’... remember mom’s advice: wash your hands. In East Thetford, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Judy.: Thank you Keith. If you just joining us we're discussing agri-tourism and food safety with natural resources specialists Lisa chase of UVM and Londa Nwadike an extension food safety specialist. Great example on the video. You go one people to be afraid to not go pick their own vegetables but these are common sense steps that we want people to be aware of.

Londa.: Yes and I think it's great that this farm was a great example of how they instilled a food safety culture on their farm and how everybody on the farm is trying to produce the best quality products they can. Vermont does have a great reputation for good quality product and we want to make sure we continue that and consumers play their part and wash their hands like they pointed out very well in the video.

Judy.: And also too leave your dogs at home.

Londa.: Right respect the rules of the farm and respect their rules that they have in place and make sure you're doing all that you can to make their product as safe as possible.

Judy.: So if the farmers just getting started with a food safety plan or just wants more information what should they do?

Lisa.: UVM extension is a great place to start. Whether a farmer is already thinking about best practices and wants to develop a formal plan and follow it through they can contact extension about that or even if they're just barely beginning to think what are the best practices that I should be following on my farm whether am open to visitors are not? Extension is a good safe place to start we're not regulate is we're not auditor's we come with the facts and researched based information and will help farmers develop a plan and then implement it.

Judy.: There's some things that consumers in general should be aware of not only if you're picking produce from a far more farm stand but even in the grocery store. I would imagine it translates because a lot of people move through grocery stores pick up produce put it back so it's a good thing to keep in mind your own personal habits as well as far as washing vegetables because just because they're in a grocery store doesn't mean they've been washed.

Londa.: That's very true. We often talk a lot about the food chain approach and thinking about the food all the way from the farm to the consumer. Every person along that chain really needs to be thinking about what they can do to make sure the food is as healthy and as safe as possible.

Lisa.: I think the local food movement is strong for a lot of reasons including community building and all sorts of non-food safety related reasons. However I do think that concerns in the Nationwide stairs that it happens on larger farms in larger processing plants that is help strengthen the local
food movement because what feels better than going to the farm you know the people you see them carefully washing everything. You see that in Vermont people are following best practices and that’s why Vermont has such a strong reputation for high quality healthy and safe food and that’s really helped with selling local foods.

Judy.: Was the first step of farmer should be thinking about if they want to jump into the agri-tourism business and invite people onto their farm?

Lisa.: It’s not just an economic opportunity it’s really a lifestyle change. One of the first questions that any farm needs to think about is would I enjoy having visitors on my farm? Because the most successful agri-tourism businesses are the ones where the farmers and the workers on the farm truly enjoy sharing their experience and sharing their culture. Their enthusiasm for agriculture then helps the visitors appreciate agriculture that much more however there are definitely farmers that would rather not have people visiting and so that would be one of the first questions. Again extension is a great place to start if farmers have questions about whether agri-tourism is right for them.

Judy.: And the number for that Londa if people are farmers are interested in that?

Londa.: For produce growers that are interested in having on farm food safety plan help should call ginger Nickerson at the UVM extension (802)-223-2389.

Judy.: And Lisa for more information on agri-tourism?

Lisa.: On agri-tourism they can pick up the phone and call any extension office is 1800 number for the Berlin office but in terms of agri-tourism support for farmers extension is a great place to start. In terms of the agri-tourism information for visitors if you’re looking for a farm to visit then the Vermont farms association website which is VT farms.org that’s the place to go for visitors.

Judy.: Terrific thank you both for joining me today. That’s our program for today I’m Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

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