

GAPs is a Four Letter Word – But So Are Safe and Food

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The 29th annual NOFA-NY – Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York – winter conference included a workshop on food safety. Held over the weekend in Saratoga Springs, the conference was larger than any previous, with registered attendance nearing a thousand, and many walk-ins expected.

The two-day food safety intensive, titled “GAPs Is a Four-Letter Word, But So Are Safe and Food,” has been run a dozen times across the state over the last few years. The workshop is not typically held in an organic setting. Led by a team of food safety experts from Cornell University and the State Department of Agriculture and Markets, these workshops educate small, diversified growers on minimizing food safety risks. The second day focuses on building a food safety plan from a template.

“Many of our audience members need to be inspected because they are required by buyers. Many think they will be required,” said Robert Hadad, vegetable specialist from the Niagara County Cornell Cooperative Extension. “Whether or not the government makes it necessary, the buyers are making it necessary.”

Wegman’s was the first supermarket in New York State to require food safety certification from its suppliers, and other chains have followed suit. The GAPs (Good Agricultural Practices) program, established in 1999, is an audit system run by USDA trained inspectors. Wholesale purchasers, such as Wegman’s, now ask their suppliers for GAP certification, which is renewed annually.

Although the process for educating farmers and handlers about GAPs guidelines in New York State is very well organized, with support from Cornell and relatively inexpensive inspections from the Department of Agriculture and Markets, small produce growers and handlers feel harassed by the idea of more paperwork and government interventions.

“We’ve done some programs where the mood was so hostile, people spent a day venting,” said Hadad. “We’ve moved to a two day program so we can spend one day talking and one day making plans.”

Presenter Betsy Bihn is the National GAPs Program Coordinator at Cornell.

“Even if you don’t need an audit, even if no one is looking for a food safety plan, make one,” she told the twenty-five people in the room. “Organic producers are doing a lot of record keeping already. In many instances you just need to tweak the records you’re already keeping.”

Not everyone at the NOFA-NY workshop was a grower. The executive chef, buyer, and sustainability coordinator from nearby Skidmore College attended, trying to understand food safety from the growing end of the spectrum as they look to buy from local producers.

Community Markets operates farmers’ markets in New York City as well as in surrounding counties, and sent three staff members to the workshop.

“We want to honor the trust that the shopper has put into us and our vendors. We want to encourage the farmers and producers that sell at our markets to develop and implement food safety plans. We want to be able to speak honestly with the public about the safety of the food we’re providing,” said Jon Zeltsman, Co-director of Community Markets.