

Grow a Row Participant FAQ

This FAQ provides guidance and resources for volunteers participating in Grow a Row efforts in Otsego and Schoharie Counties. These materials are designed to help you plan, grow, harvest, and donate produce effectively and safely. Please be on the lookout for email updates and refer back to the CCESO Website often for up-to-date information: <https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/grow-a-row>



What is Grow a Row?

Grow a Row encourages gardeners and farmers to dedicate a portion of their garden to growing fresh produce specifically for donation to local food pantries. The goal is to increase access to fresh, nutritious food within our community.

How does it work?

- Sign up to be a Grow a Row Grower!
- Take advantage of the Grower Educational Resources and Training (see below)!
- Harvest produce at peak freshness!
- Deliver to a participating Food Pantry or drop location using the Grow a Row interactive map.

Where can I donate my produce?

In collaboration with the Otsego Department of Health, an interactive Grow a Row map was created to help Growers locate a participating pantry or produce drop location. On this map you'll find food pantry locations, hours, contact info, and information about what types of produce each pantry accepts. Note that some pantries request you call ahead. Please visit <https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/grow-a-row> to access the map.

How do I track my donations?

Many food pantries will track your donation upon delivery. Please make sure you tell them that you are part of Grow a Row! You will also be given a Produce Donation Tracking Form to record what you donate. Tracking helps measure the impact of the program and supports future funding opportunities. Tracking forms can be submitted via email to Marcie Foster (mkf48@cornell.edu) or mail (123 Lake Street, Cooperstown, NY 13326) at the end of every month. Weight in pounds is the suggested method for tracking produce, however, if you do not have a scale, you can describe the items you are donating (ex. 5 gallon bag of beans; 5 medium tomatoes, etc.).

Can I get my soil tested before planting?

Yes! If you are growing produce to donate, you are eligible for a **FREE Soil Nutrient Test** through the [Community Garden Soil Testing Program](https://harvestny.cce.cornell.edu/uploads/doc_263.pdf) (https://harvestny.cce.cornell.edu/uploads/doc_263.pdf). Soil testing helps ensure safe growing conditions and improves crop success. Please be advised that testing through this program could take up to 6 weeks to get results. If you would like assistance obtaining a soil nutrient test sooner, please contact Marcie Foster (mkf48@cornell.edu; 607-547-2536 ext. 235) for more information and resources.

What should I plant?

Master Gardener Volunteers have created a **Suggested Vegetables Varieties List** for Grow a Row. This can be found on the CCESO website (<https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/grow-a-row>). Use this list of easy-to-grow, high-yield vegetable varieties that are well-suited for donation.

These varieties are selected because they:

- Produce high yields
- Are easy for beginners
- Transport well
- Are commonly accepted by food pantries

Cornell CALS Garden Based Learning Website is an excellent source for gardening guidance.
<https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/>.

Is there a sample planting and maintenance plan?

Yes. The following planning tools are available on the CCESO website (<https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/grow-a-row>):

- Sample Planting Schedule, Maintenance, and Harvest Plan
- Sample Planting Plan from CCE Grow Garden – Square Foot Gardening

These resources help you:

- Plan planting timelines
 - Stagger harvests
 - Maintain consistent donations
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Where can I find gardening resources?

Master Gardener Volunteers have compiled a list of gardening resources that can be found on the CCESO website (<https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/grow-a-row>).

Cornell Garden Based Learning is also a wonderful resource for gardening guidance: <https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/>.

How much should I plant?

However much you want! We always advise new gardeners to start small and build up.

Use the Cornell Spacing & Expected Yield for Garden Vegetables in New York:

<https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.cornell.edu/dist/c/10116/files/Recommended-spacing-and-expected-yield-for-garden-vegetables-in-New-York-1iozy2c.pdf>

This guide helps determine:

- How many plants to grow
 - Expected harvest volume
 - Best spacing for productivity
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How should I handle food safety and packaging?

Food Safety and Packaging Guidance

There are no food safety requirements when you donate produce. However, one of the biggest challenges when growing food, particularly produce that is not normally cooked before eating, is the risk of contamination with disease or sickness causing microbes called pathogens. There is no simple method to remove all pathogens from food, but growers can take a few steps to reduce the risk of contamination. We recommend that all growers follow basic food safety practices when growing for yourself and others. This includes:

- Use potable drinking water for irrigation.
- Test your soil for contaminants.
- Use only aged compost or manure to avoid adding harmful pathogens to your produce. If you do apply raw manure, wait at least 120 days before harvest for crops that touch the soil.
- Keep pets and livestock out of the garden.
- Wash hands before and after gardening, especially after handling soil or raw fertilizer
- Use clean and sanitized tools for harvesting.
- Remove any dirt from produce.
- Use clean containers or food safe bags for harvesting. Label produce type and date when harvested. If donating the produce to pantries label also with “Grow a Row”.
- Deliver or store the produce as soon as possible. A good reference for produce storing is the “**American Heart Association-Healthy for Good**” infographic - https://www.heart.org/-/media/Healthy-Living-Files/Infographics/Food-Storage-Keep-it-Fresh-Infographic.pdf?sc_lang=en
- All produce should be washed before consuming.

For more information on food safety

Healthy Gardening: Tips for New and Experienced Gardeners:

www.health.ny.gov/publications/1301

FIVE STEPS TO FOOD SAFE FRUIT AND VEGETABLE HOME GARDENING -

<https://mastergardener.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/703/2021/04/Five-Steps-to-Food-Safe-Home-Gardening-Fact-Sheet-1.pdf>

Food Safety Tips for Your Edible Home Garden -

<https://ucfoodsafety.ucdavis.edu/sites/g/files/dgvnsk7366/files/inline-files/203224.pdf>

Do I need gardening experience to participate?

No gardening experience is required. Grow a Row is open to gardeners of all skill levels. Many participants are beginners, and the provided resources are designed to help you succeed from planning through harvest.

Can I participate if I only have a small garden or containers?

Yes. You can participate with any amount of space, including raised beds, container gardens, or a small backyard plot. Even a few plants can provide meaningful donations. Square foot gardening and the resources mentioned above help you maximize yield with even small spaces!

Is there a minimum amount I need to grow?

No. There is no minimum requirement. Grow a Row welcomes donations of any size. Even a small amount of fresh produce can make a meaningful difference. Participants are encouraged to grow what is realistic for their space, time, and experience level.

What if something happens and my plants don't produce?

That's okay. Gardening can be unpredictable due to weather, pests, or other factors. There is no obligation to donate a specific quantity. Simply do your best, and any successful harvest you are able to share is appreciated.

What condition should produce be in?

Produce should be fresh, clean, and free from rot or significant damage. Minor cosmetic imperfections are usually acceptable, but avoid donating anything that is overripe, bruised, or spoiled. When in doubt, donate produce you would feel comfortable serving to your own family.

Should I wash produce before donating?

Check pantry preferences when possible. Some produce actually stores better if you do not wash it in advance. Produce should always be washed prior to consuming it. In general, follow these guidelines:

- Brush off excess soil from root vegetables
 - Do not soak produce unless requested
 - Make sure produce is dry before packaging
 - Remove damaged leaves or portions
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Do I need to contact the pantry before dropping off?

Some pantries appreciate advance notice, especially for large donations or highly perishable items. Review the pantry details on the Grow a Row map for contact information and any specific instructions.

For questions, contact Marcie Foster (mkf48@cornell.edu) (607-547-2536 ext. 235)

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