

## FOCUS: FOOD SAFETY IN THE VALUE CHAIN

## Where did CanadaGAP come from?

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By now, the CanadaGAP food safety program for fresh fruits and vegetables is well known in the industry. But fewer people are familiar with where it came from and how it got started. The program has a compelling history and a course of development that is unique among internationally recognized food safety programs.

CanadaGAP arose from a need identified by fruit and vegetable producers themselves. In the 1990s, a number of food safety outbreaks started gaining media attention, especially in the United States. Several incidents were associated with fruits and vegetables, including raspberries imported from Guatemala, strawberries from Mexico, and tomatoes grown in South Carolina. Concerns about food safety started to increase among consumers, retailers, processors and food service companies. In the business-to-business environment, buyers began looking more closely at the companies supplying them with product.

At first, customers asked their suppliers to follow buyer-specific protocols for food safety. The requirements varied considerably, and sometimes conflicted. To verify compliance, some buyers audited their suppliers through retailer or processor visits, referred to as “second party” audits. Others used a third party to confirm that suppliers had the required food safety practices in place. Those customers usually had a list of approved auditors, meaning that one audit was not typically acceptable to all customers. If a producer was supplying a number of customers, the producer could undergo multiple second or third-party audits, to demonstrate compliance with standards that often did not align. The cost and burden of those audits were becoming increasingly onerous for producers. Differences between the various standards also raised questions and caused unnecessary confusion in the industry.

In Canada, fresh fruit and vegetable producers and packers brought these issues to the attention of their national trade association, the Canadian Horticultural Council (CHC). The CHC responded to these concerns by seeking a mandate from its members in the late 1990s to develop a national on-farm food safety program for horticulture in Canada. The vision was to create ONE auditable standard that would be acceptable to ALL buyers. Funding was available from the federal department of agriculture to fund development of a program that could be implemented by fruit and vegetable suppliers across the country. At the same time, the Canadian Produce

Marketing Association (CPMA) undertook a parallel initiative for fresh produce repackers and wholesalers.

The program being developed had to meet a number of criteria:

- The requirements had to be based on HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points)
- The requirements had to be reviewed and deemed technically sound by Canadian federal and provincial governments, under the Canadian Government Food Safety Recognition Program led by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.
- The standard had to be rigorous and acceptable to buyers (retailers, processors and food service customers) both inside and outside Canada.
- The program had to be credible to industry, engage producers in its development, and reflect relevant on-farm practices.
- The requirements had to be auditable.
- The requirements had to be clear, descriptive and straightforward, to streamline the audit process and to help producers understand how to meet the standard.

Once the decision was made to embark on this path, the key goal was to engage as many industry participants and stakeholders as possible in the design and development of the program. Coordinated by the CHC, eight commodity-specific working groups, including producers, packers and processors who volunteered many hours of their time, laboured over the contents of the standard for five years. The goal was to reflect the realities of farming and yield a complete food safety toolkit that would be useful to producers, packers and other handlers of more than 150 fruit and vegetable crops.

Once the standard was complete, it underwent review and was deemed technically sound by provincial and federal governments. At that point the industry made the decision, through a resolution adopted unanimously by CHC members, to build and offer a certification system by which producers could become “CanadaGAP-certified.” The initiative was founded on the principles of providing a service to growers at the lowest possible cost to industry. That would be achieved through managing resources prudently, leveraging available partnerships, and streamlining the audit and certification process as much as possible through careful program design.

Launched in 2008, CanadaGAP certification was



This asparagus packing line is set up to meet CanadaGAP food safety standards. Photo by Glenn Lawson.

soon internationally recognized after successful benchmarking by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI). In 2012, CHC and CPMA joined forces to establish an independent corporate entity dedicated solely to managing the CanadaGAP program. This corporation, CanAgPlus, administers the program on a not-for-profit basis and closely follows its original mandate. The operation is self-sustaining, and the annual fees paid by growers have remained stable since the program's inception.

Unlike other food safety programs that were developed by

customers and simply imposed on producers, the CanadaGAP program was driven by producers themselves, who played a key role in its development. What makes CanadaGAP special is its ground-up, rather than top-down, approach. No other program incorporates its standard in a full and freely accessible user manual. In addition to setting out program requirements, the manual offers acceptable procedures to follow and explains the “how” as well as the “why.” The toolkit includes a full set of templates for record-keeping, complemented by a range of checklists, examples and

other resource materials. CanadaGAP is also unique in the technical soundness and credibility afforded by its government-reviewed generic HACCP models. The management of the certification program is based on a member-driven, not-for-profit model. Its reason for being continues to revolve around promoting adoption of food safety practices by fruit and vegetable suppliers at the lowest possible cost to the industry.

Read more about our producers and some of their “Success Stories” at [www.canadagap.ca](http://www.canadagap.ca)

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