



COVID-19: Information for Horticultural Producers

Horticultural production is currently the fourth largest Agri-food sector in Ireland, employing a large number of people. As the primary production season for Irish fruits and vegetables is upon us, in the context of COVID-19, additional planning and risk assessment at the business level for every operator will be required. Teagasc Horticultural Development Department, in producing this short communication, aim to compile information available from the relevant competent authorities and also provide some suggestions for producers to consider in the coming weeks.

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that usually cause respiratory illness. COVID-19 is a new strain that has not previously been identified in humans. COVID-19 has already and is currently causing significant disruption to businesses. The European Food Safety Authority has stated that there is currently no evidence that food is a likely source or route of transmission of the coronavirus.

However, growers need to act to assess the impacts of COVID-19 and the associated national mitigation measures on their business and how best to prepare for the period ahead. The following communication has been compiled as a reference information source (as of 13/03/20) which may be of use to horticultural food producers. However given the frequently changing circumstances and governmental advice, please continue to check listed references for the most current advice.

1. Employer and Employee Obligations

According to the [Safety Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005](#), both [employers](#) and employees have specific duties of care. Employers should ensure that employees understand the correct process if they feel unwell or are diagnosed with a contagious illness, such as coronavirus.

Existing [legislation](#) (Reg. 852/2004) clearly states that ‘Every person working in a food-handling area is to maintain a high degree of personal cleanliness and is to wear suitable, clean and , where necessary, protective clothing’, furthermore, ‘No person suffering from, or being a carrier of a disease likely to be transmitted through food or afflicted, for example, with infected wounds, skin infections, sores or diarrhoea is to be permitted to handle food or enter any food-handling area in any capacity if there is any likelihood of direct or indirect contamination. Any person so affected and employed in a food business and who is likely to come into contact with food is to report immediately the illness or symptoms, and if possible their causes, to the food business operator’ (Chapter VIII, Point 1 & 2, Reg. 852/2004).

Employers should ensure that all employees’ responsibilities are reinforced through staff training and instruction on site. These systems and procedures already exist on your premises, but should be updated in view of recent instructions regarding hygiene and social distancing. It may also be necessary to update staff on staff illness policy owing to recent government announcements (Please see point 2).

2. Sick pay

Employers should ensure that staff understand that no one should report to work if feeling unwell and should follow [HSE guidelines](#). Employees potentially affected should contact their doctor by phone and follow medical guidance. Employees can seek enhanced illness benefit for COVID-19 from Social welfare. [Citizens Information](#) advises that if you or an employee is diagnosed with COVID-19 or are medically required to self-isolate, you can get income support such as [Illness Benefit](#) or [Supplementary Welfare Allowance](#) from the [Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection](#).

3. Continuity Planning

3.1 Staff Management

In order to attempt to manage any potential disruption to your business from COVID-19, where possible it may be advisable to limit potential for community spread in house by separating employees into teams. These teams may work together; take rostered breaks separate from other teams etc. The implementation of the team structure may ensure that the adherence to hygiene and social distancing measures is more effective.

3.2 Risk Assessment

Growers should begin to plan for the overall potential for a reduced work force due to COVID-19. Some tasks which should be considered include:

- Review of production capacity with reduced staffing levels, on a basis of low, medium and high levels of absence. Contingency planning with regards to key staff should be prioritised. It would be advisable to consider how operations will continue in the event of sickness to owner / managers.
- Consideration needs to be given to risk associated with sourcing raw materials and equipment which are vital for continued operation of the business. In the last 24 months, many growers have placed emphasis on this form of planning due to uncertainties around Brexit. A similar effort encompassing non-UK based suppliers may be appropriate at this juncture.
- Enhanced communication with outsourced logistic providers for mitigation of any potential dispatch delays.
- Investigate the potential implication for your business and planned production levels of any changes in seasonal workers behaviour and emerging travel restrictions. Please consider issues such as 'affected country' status, but also the potential for new staff to have to self-isolate before commencing employment.

4. Useful Links

Please refer to the relevant authority in regards to food safety concerns and instructions. Please find below links to the relevant websites for the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and European Food Safety Authority.

- <https://www.fsai.ie/faq/coronavirus.html>
- <https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/news/coronavirus-no-evidence-food-source-or-transmission-route>
- [https://www.fsai.ie/legislation/food legislation/food hygiene/hygiene of foodstuffs.html](https://www.fsai.ie/legislation/food_legislation/food_hygiene/hygiene_of_foodstuffs.html)

Updates of the evolving situation can be accessed through the following links:

- <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>
- <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/99104a-covid-19-coronavirus/>

5. Teagasc Contact

We remain available to discuss any issues of concern. Please continue to engage with us by phone. Farm visits will only be undertaken at the clients request and only for urgent issues. Social distancing and hygiene protocols will be strictly adhered to in that instance. We will abide by any new visitor access arrangements which you have in place.

For a full list of Horticulture Staff contacts please see <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/horticulture/>