

Greenhouses lead way in food safety

Village Farms implements multitude of protocols to ensure high quality produce

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Consumers have never been more interested in the safety of their food than they are today.

Satinder Sanghera is reason for confidence when it comes to greenhouse grown vegetables. In charge of food safety at Village Farms, Sanghera, a graduate of food science from UBC, has made a career of ensuring high quality produce is delivered to retailers.

Evidence of food safety protocols are seen everywhere on a visit to Village Farms, a 50-hectare greenhouse in Delta. There are security gates that you are buzzed through to enter the property, a footbath you dip your shoes into and a sanitizer you wash your hands with before entering the office, as well as a visitor's log you are required to sign.



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Food safety specialist Satinder Sanghera in the packing house at Village Farms in Delta. Sanghera has made a career of ensuring high quality produce is delivered to retailers.

"We even monitor the municipal water that we use," says Sanghera as she removes her rings and wristwatch, behind which microorganisms can hide, and slips on a lab coat, hairnet and latex gloves before heading into the packing house.

The packing line is almost fully automated and tomatoes are packed and shipped on the same day they are picked. Each box gets a code, allowing Sanghera to know which greenhouse the box was from, the date it was packed and the customer to which it was sent.

"If there is ever a problem I can have the full history of any shipment up on my computer screen in a matter of minutes," says Sanghera.

Having food safety protocols, like a trace back system, is only a first step.

"We are always reviewing our existing protocols," explains Sanghera. "And a monthly self-audit allows us to see if any areas need improvement and where to focus our ongoing staff training."

Once a year a third party auditor spends a full day in the greenhouse and packinghouse checking to make sure nothing was overlooked and issues a food safety certificate that retailers ask to see before they buy product.

The third party audits were adopted by the greenhouse vegetable sector about 10

years ago.

"At that time we were looking for ways to distinguish ourselves from other produce," recalls Sanghera, "but I feel greenhouses will always have a food safety advantage because we are closed off from the outside. It means we don't have to worry about things like wildlife, pollution and other potential contaminants affecting our crops."

The enclosed greenhouse environment also made it easier for Sanghera to implement food biosecurity protocols.

"We brought additional protocols in after 9/11," says Sanghera, "when some people became concerned that terrorists might poison the food supply."

Now every door into the facility is locked and can only be opened with a key code.

Trucks contracted by Village Farms to deliver fresh produce to retailers have a seal placed across the back doors.

"If anyone opens the doors before a truck gets to one of our distribution centers then the seal is broken," explains Sanghera, "and we investigate to determine if anyone has tampered with the load."

Village Farms is a member of the B.C. Greenhouse Growers' Association, a non-profit organization representing B.C.'s greenhouse vegetable growers. Its growers produce 11 per cent of the province's total agriculture production value on only 0.01 per cent of B.C.'s total farmland. For more information, log on to www.bcgreenhouse.ca or www.VillageFarms.com.

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