

Puckette Farms: Virginia Cooperative Extension Mentors Growers in GAP Certification Preparation

PART I: Introduction to the Farm

We are at Puckette Farms today in Southside, Virginia with Aaron Puckette, the owner. I'm Amber Vallotton from Virginia Cooperative Extension. Just tell us a little bit about your farm, how long you've been doing the farming business, and the kinds of products that you all grow.

Well, I've been growing pretty much all my life farming. The last four years we've been growing produce, selling wholesale and retail through a farmer's market and a CSA --community supported agriculture—is what that stands for--and we're growing on plastic and what you can see behind us with drip underneath it.

PART II: GAP Audit Preparation

So, tell us how extension was integrally involved with you in getting your GAP certification.

They walked us through every page of a pretty intense book, making sure that we knew how to fill it all out. We couldn't have done it without extension for sure.

So I'm Joanne Jones and I'm the ANR agent in Charlotte County. And I had the privilege to work with Puckette Farms and Aaron to get his GAP certification last year. Aaron was very easy to work with. We came out, we met, we talked about all of his practices. We walked through his operation from start to finish, from when he planted to when he harvested and discussed what he was doing, changes that need to be made. Then we worked on his manual, recording all that information.

When we started with the GAP manual for Puckette Farms, we had to start by looking at what fields he was going to plan in the acreages on those fields and what crops will go in them. And then we had to do a mapping system on his irrigation, how that would get to the field. We looked at security issues with wildlife as well as if he had farm animals or pets on his farm--documented on how we would handle it. We looked at his fertilizer amendments as well as where he's making his purchases for its seeds and his plants that he would use. Discussed how all that would be covered and where we would put that in the manual. And then we looked at buyer security issues as far as transportation to get his product from his location to the facility where he delivered to where it was aggregated. And we looked at the different sanitation practices that would need to be used to clean the equipment he would use in the field, as well as transportation. And then once we got that done, we wrapped everything up in the manual and got everything recorded to complete the manual.

Now that I've explained what goes into the manual and what maybe the farm review would look like with us coming out and walking with Aaron through everything once we think you're prepared for the auditor, I want to ask Aaron a few questions.

How did you feel about the process? Was it painful at all?

It all went smooth and I thought it was really easy. I thought it would be one of the most difficult things I ever did, to be honest.

I know it was pretty painless, you say, but what were some of the challenges that you felt you faced when preparing for the GAP audit, as well as getting the manual together?

Just finding the time to sit down and write all this down. That's the hardest part -- sitting down and writing everything down.

Yeah, don't you feel like a lot of the record-keeping you were probably doing previously? As far as like planting and your fertilization and chemical records and now you just have it all in one nice location. [Yeah.] And it's nice to refer back to? [Yeah.]

Now, how do you think GAP has benefited your farm and your operation?

You know, once we started doing this, I'm glad we did it because like you said, we have everything in one place and it's all documented. And we know that we're, um, and we have all the tools we need to grow it, right, and protect ourselves doing it. [Traceability is such a big thing.]

When you got started, I'm sure you had some questions about what GAP was and how this would look like. Do you feel like with extension we were able to answer those questions?

Oh, yeah, sure. It was like I said before, we couldn't have done it without extension. Having them there was crucial for us to be able to grow produce at all. I mean, we probably would have never been able to do it at all.

And then another thing. Do you feel like after going through the GAP audit and getting ready and having the on-farm review with extension, did it change a lot of your practices or do you feel like you were already doing it? It just made you feel more comfortable that you were doing...

We were already doing a lot of them. But some of the things, I mean, of course, it's made us better for sure.

Got you. Well, thank you.

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