

Wyndale Gardens: Virginia Cooperative Extension Mentors Growers in GAP Certification Preparation

Today we are with Scott and Becky Ramsey at Wyndale Gardens, and we're really happy to be here and to look at their aquaponics operation and also looking at their GAP process to become GAP certified.

PART I: Introduction to the Farm

Here at Wyndale Gardens we use a farming technique called Aquaponics. We use 300 Blue Nile tilapia to provide all the nutrients for our leafy greens and vegetables. We grow about 1,200 heads of lettuce every month.

Okay, Scott, this is really amazing what you and Becky have here. Can you tell us how this system works? A lot of people aren't familiar with aquaponics.

Yeah, absolutely. So aquaponics is the combination of aquaculture, which is the raising of fish, and hydroponics, which is growing without soil. We take those two farming techniques, we merge them together, and we get aquaponics. So, we start in the back with our 300-gallon fish tanks. We have 150 blue Nile tilapia. We feed them high density protein pellets that gets broken down into the nitrification process that provides all of the nutrients, both macro and micronutrients, that we need to produce our lettuce.

You obviously are growing more than one type of vegetable and you also have the tilapia. Tell us about the diversification. Not only of this but some of the other things you had that you plan to do on your farm?

Our primary focus is on our green butter lettuce and our spring mix. Our spring mix has about six different varieties of what we call one-cut lettuces. We also grow iceberg experimenting with that, and we also grow some other leafy greens like arugula, kale spinach. And just here behind us where we're starting our tomato system, tomatoes and cucumbers as well, to expand our produce line.

So, you have beautiful product here. Can you tell us where do you actually sell your items?

So currently, right now, we market our items to the Abingdon Farmer's Market. We're also working with a program where we're doing farm to school. We're currently selling to Bristol City Schools. We are also going to be featured soon in Food City here in Abingdon.

As you all have gotten into your markets, what has led you in the direction of becoming GAP certified?

Well, GAP certification is really crucial for the type of markets that we're going after. We need to be able to have traceability for our food products and show that we are using best agricultural practices as we are making our product to have a high dense, nutritious food for the public, and also that they know that it is safe and locally grown. One other thing we're doing is feeding the children of our communities. We want to make sure that the product that we're delivering to them is safe and nutritious and delicious.

PART II: GAP Audit Preparation

Okay. So as we're going through this process, one of the things to remember that part of what we're going to do is we're going to create this manual which is your plan of action manual. And this describes

all of your processes. It logs your different records and procedures. Anytime you do something, your water test, different assessments that you might have, your traceability system. And then in addition to creating this manual, which we've provided a template for you, so it's really a matter of you making this fit to your aquaponic system and operation.

The other main thing that the GAP audit requires is to actually have everything in place in terms of the practical side of things, your signage, and making sure that those procedures that you're actually doing those practices and conducting it the right way. So you've already, I've noticed, got a lot in place here already that looks fantastic, you're organized and things are clean, so I think a lot of this is going to be just going through this process, working through the manual, and we'll work through that with you all so that you can see how things are done.

So, when we're talking about the manual, we're going to be doing the two main sections or scopes that are called 'general questions' and 'field pack and field harvesting'. The general questions basically deal with the management. It's going to talk about your basic plan, worker health and hygiene and the training, those kinds of things. It's going to talk about, in general, the water testing, traceability, recall programs. It'll also look at any corrective actions you might take. You'll also be looking at how you deal with your waste material that you might have. And then food defense, which we talked about some, just understanding how you deal with trying to protect this place from somebody coming in and doing something to it. [Got it.]

Then the other section -F section- that's basically looking more at kind of the farm level. Your land use history, what was done before, what have you done now, what's the structure, that kind of thing. You're going to look at any plant protection products, any of your chemicals you're using like acidification of your system or making it more of a basic system, whatever that might be. Anything like that. Sanidate or Oxidate. You're going to talk about your water system. You're going to talk about your plan for your water, what that looks like, actually mapping out your system, animal activity, soil amendments aren't really going to be that important here, but you did talk about tomatoes so, when you start doing that part of it, you'll want to do an assessment on that.

The other main thing will be looking at your equipment, your tools, your utensils, so things like your tabletop, your sinks, all that kind of stuff is all part of this section. Your pre harvest. Doing an assessment before you harvest. If you were using ice of any kind, or water for something, as in like to cool or that kind of thing, then you would have to have that on it. Your containers, your bins, your packaging, and handling. Okay. And then your transportation, so how you get it to the marketplace.

So that's basically general questions and field harvest and field pack.

PART III: Audit Day

Scott and Becky, y'all just got your audit and congratulations, you successfully passed. Tell us about that process for you, and what was that like?

Well, first of all, thank you so much for all of your help and guidance throughout this process because looking at a tremendous binder with pages of documentation without some support to kind of work through those. I don't know if we would be standing here today. So thank you so much.

I think the next thing is just making sure that you work together as a team to sit down and walk through it together. Putting it together, organizing it together, you both kind of are talking about the processes as you're going through it, and how can we organize it so that he can use it on a regular basis, but I know how to find things and other people who come in and are looking for things can find it as well.

Yeah, that was a challenging part, right? Because you're in the farm every day. You know what you're doing. You know, you're following good food and safety guidelines, but then when you go to put it on paper and start, you know, kind of articulating what you're doing and laying it out, you know, it really kind of helps you organize your thoughts a lot better--sheds a light on some of the things that you could be doing differently or not doing. So, you know, I think going through that GAP Manual was really helpful.

Great. Well, I know that before you had the audit, you actually texted me and said, I'm kind of scared about today. And so talk about the audit itself. What did you think about that?

Don't be scared of it, I guess is my main takeaway. You don't actually have to be scared of it. I know that "audit" is just a really scary word and observation. Anything that comes in like that, we all get a little anxious about it, but don't be nervous about it. It's not supposed to be a huge gotcha moment, but more of a guidance and correction.

Yeah, I'll add on to that too. You guys and the inspector or the auditor who is here today really do want us to be successful. They do want us to succeed. They have a hard job making sure that our food supply chain is safe and we're following food and safety, health regulations. And they want to make sure what you're doing and they want to coach you through it. So it was a lot of coaching, some good feedback. But at the end of the day, you know, I felt supported, felt like, you know, he wanted us to pass. It wasn't like, oh, you're not doing this right. You're not doing this right. It wasn't like Becky said, it wasn't like trying to find gotchas. It was more of like, hey, you guys are doing all of the things right., and here's some little things you could change or maybe look at a little bit differently. So it was a very supportive environment, it wasn't scary at all.

Great! Well, I want to thank you both so much for your time.

Thank you. Thank you.

It's been great to work with you all and I wish you all the best, your endeavor in the future.

Thank you, Amber, for so much.

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