

Wash & Pack Basic Design

How you handle your produce after harvest can mean the difference between a long-lasting, visually appealing and delicious crop that keeps customers coming back for more or a crop that is ready for the compost pile.

For many farmers, designing an effective wash and pack station can take a backseat to honing crop production methods. Yet, a dysfunctional wash and pack station could diminish the condition of your produce in one fell swoop, despite the many months of work you have put into growing the produce.

Many wash and pack areas are a-do-it-yourself affairs, while others are developed with purpose-built equipment and utilities at the ready. In either case, when you are designing a wash and pack station, here are some things to keep in mind.

Locate your wash and pack station close to your production areas

This will reduce the amount of time crops spend between harvest and storage, increasing their quality and shelf life.

Set up overhead coverage

While it may seem obvious to get your produce into a covered area after harvest, many farmers do some or all of their washing and packing in uncovered spaces. Getting your product out of the sun helps improve the shelf life of your crops and reduce food safety risks. Protection from the elements also improves your and your crew's comfort and helps maintain energy during long harvest days. Coverage does not need to be fancy—pop up tents or tarps are fast and cheap.

Create a functional floor

Gravel flooring with good drainage systems allow areas to drain wash water system. Or you might want to go with a concrete floor, on which equipment can be easily rolled and hosed down for cleanup.

Create clear systems of procedure

Developing specific systems for how to harvest, wash and pack each one of your crops will maintain crop quality and significantly cut down on harvest time. Even better, recording these systems in a manual or on posters that the entire field crew can easily access will reduce confusion, improve employee training and maintain quality standards. Consider

taking photos to accompany written instructions, helping to demonstrate correct procedures at a glance. Over time, fine tune your systems by paying close attention to details—small changes can have significant effect on crop quality. Color coded bins, clear labeling, and spacing can be helpful to create clear systems.

Optimize your wash and pack station layout

Draw a map of how your crops flow through the space of your wash and pack station. At what points do washing or packing get slowed down and why? What can you do to mitigate these bottlenecks? Is it a matter of investing in a new tool or piece of equipment, or can you adjust your procedures? Also consider how you and your employees are using the space. Will adjusting the height of a table make working more comfortable? A good thing to keep in mind is to keep your equipment flexible so you can trail and adjust different layouts until you find an optimal flow for moving crops and farmers through the space before committing to a permanent layout.

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Lowell Matthews from Nature's Circle Farm in their building where potatoes are cleaned and bagged.



Vegetable packing area at Ripley's farm.

