

Receiving Foreign Plants, Food, and Other Agricultural Products in the Mail

The United States is free from many agricultural pests and diseases that cause severe damage elsewhere in the world. To keep those pests and diseases out of the United States, our country has laws that prohibit or restrict the entry of certain agricultural products from abroad, including meats, fruits, vegetables, plants, soil, seeds, herbal medicines, and some plant-based handicrafts, among other items. These restrictions help protect against serious threats—even one introduction of a new pest or disease here could harm our Nation's agricultural and natural resources, causing millions of dollars in damage, expensive eradication efforts, lost trade revenue, and higher food prices.

Together, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) enforce our country's agricultural import regulations. You, too, have an important role to play in keeping the U.S. food supply safe, affordable, and abundant.

You Are the “Importer of Record”

Whether it's a souvenir sent by a friend who's vacationing abroad, food sent from family members living overseas, or seeds purchased for your garden through the Internet, the contents of that package could pose a risk to U.S. agriculture or the environment. As the package's intended recipient, you are considered the official importer of record and are legally responsible for it—even if you didn't know it was coming. The package may be seized and destroyed at the port of entry by DHS Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers; you may also face steep fines under applicable USDA regulations.

To avoid such outcomes, here are some guidelines:

- **Ask for advance notice.** Tell friends and family members to let you know before they send any items to you in the United States so you can check with your nearest USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) office to make sure those items are eligible for import.
- **Let U.S. merchants handle the importing.** When purchasing online or through a catalog,

choose items that ship from within the United States. That way, you do not have to take responsibility for the import process yourself. If you do purchase items that will ship from another country, check first with your nearest APHIS office for any restrictions that may apply.

- **Don't assume it's legal.** Just because something is available for purchase online, do not assume it is legal to import into the United States. Foreign shippers may not be aware of U.S. regulations or may not care about your liability as the importer.
- **Watch out for look-alikes.** Despite often seeming identical, many of the foreign foods and agricultural products found in U.S. retail markets are not the same as their counterparts in the marketplace abroad. Retail products may contain different ingredients to meet specific import regulations or may have undergone special treatments that would not be feasible for a person to apply to small amounts. As a result, even familiar items on store shelves in the United States may be ineligible for you to import yourself for personal use. Generally, it's a good idea to buy such products at retail sites in the United States; if, however, you want to see about importing them directly by mail, contact your nearest APHIS office first.
- **Stop repeat shipments.** If your package arriving from family or friends is seized by CBP officers, make sure those same items do not get sent again. If you purchased the product from a foreign business, contact that vendor for your money back. Do not accept the vendor's offer to replace the confiscated item or send you a substitute.
- **Check the status.** Import regulations change frequently in response to emerging pests and diseases around the world. Even though you may have legally imported an agricultural product through the mail in the past, do not assume the item is still eligible for entry. Contact your nearest APHIS office to determine the status of the product and the current procedures to import it.
- **Know the difference: mail vs. hand-carry.** Importing agricultural products through the mail is not the same as carrying them into the country with you through an airport or land border. Different procedures apply. Information for returning U.S. citizens or foreign nationals who plan to visit here is available on the APHIS International Travel Information page: www.aphis.usda.gov/travel.

Plants and Seeds for Planting

To keep plant pests and diseases out of the United States, live plants and seeds for planting are not allowed into the country without a phytosanitary certificate (including shipments from Canada). Issued by agriculture officials in the shipping country, a phytosanitary certificate verifies that the plants or seeds were inspected, are free from harmful pests and diseases, and meet applicable U.S. entry requirements.

If a prospective shipper is unwilling to obtain a phytosanitary certificate or tells you that one is not needed for your purchase, you should cancel your order: those plants or seeds from that shipper are illegal for import into the United States. The only exception is for small amounts of seed that are allowed to enter the United States under a USDA Small Lots of Seed (SLOS) permit instead of a phytosanitary certificate. Information about SLOS permits and how to apply for them is available on the APHIS Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov/plant-health/small-lot-seeds.

In addition to a phytosanitary certificate, some plants and seeds may require further paperwork, treatment, or inspection. Please contact APHIS for more information.

Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Many fresh fruits and vegetables are prohibited entry into the United States. While some foreign fruits and vegetables are available in U.S. retail markets, they often cannot be imported directly by individuals for personal consumption. Commercial fruit and vegetable importers meet specific APHIS requirements for handling, packing, inspecting, and treating their shipments to safeguard against the introduction of potentially devastating agricultural pests and diseases. For example, a single mango infested with fruit fly larvae mailed to you from overseas, then thrown into the garbage here, could lead to a fruit fly outbreak that might cost the United States millions of dollars to eradicate.

Plant Products, Insects, and Soil

Many dried or processed plant products—such as citrus peel, rice straw, lentils, some natural handicrafts, and certain herbs for medicine—also have special entry requirements, depending on the country from which they ship. Soil, imported as a growing medium for plants or for any other reason, is restricted entry because of the many soil-borne pests and diseases it may contain. Similarly, items that are otherwise not covered by agricultural regulations but are contaminated with soil (for example, dirty boots, tools, or muddy recreational gear) may be refused or destroyed by CBP officers at the port of entry. In addition, the importation of live

insects and snails in all life stages, including eggs, is allowed only after receiving a permit from APHIS.

Meat, Animals, and Animal Byproducts

Meat, animals, animal waste, and products derived from animals can bring deadly foreign diseases into the United States, including foot-and-mouth disease, exotic Newcastle disease, hog cholera, and avian influenza. Outbreaks of these diseases not only sicken animals, but also cause significant economic losses. For example, an outbreak of exotic Newcastle disease in California and other western States in 2002–2003 cost the Federal and State governments more than \$170 million to eradicate. Some poultry owners lost not only their birds, but also their livelihood.

As with fruits and vegetables, some processed animal products (such as meat, preserved eggs, extracts, and bouillon) may be found in U.S. markets but still be ineligible for import by individuals. U.S. merchants, in cooperation with their foreign suppliers, follow APHIS requirements to handle, pack, and treat their shipments in ways that address disease risk. Purchasing these items in the United States, rather than trying to import them yourself, will generally save you time and trouble. If you want to import animal products directly through the mail, check with APHIS on eligibility and restrictions.

Contact Us

To see whether a specific agricultural item is allowed to enter the United States through the mail, or to report the possibility that something has entered illegally, first contact your nearest **APHIS State Plant Health Director** (for plants, plant products, insects, and soil) or your **APHIS Area Veterinarian-in-Charge** (for animals, meat, and other animal products). A complete directory is available on the APHIS Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov/planthealth/sphd and www.aphis.usda.gov/animal-health/state-offices.

If you have more questions about importing plants, plant products, insects, or soil, please call **APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine Permit Unit** at (877) 770-5990 or email permits@aphis.usda.gov.

For further questions about importing meat, animals, and animal byproducts, call **APHIS' Veterinary Services National Import Export Services** at (301) 851-3300 or email AskNIES.Products@aphis.usda.gov.

More information on APHIS' role in protecting U.S. plant and animal health is available on our Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov.

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