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

Today, it is common to purchase, send, and receive items from around the world. However, a handcrafted item made of wood sent by a friend who's vacationing abroad, food sent from family members living overseas, or seeds purchased online for your garden—the contents of that package could pose a risk to U.S. agriculture or the environment. That's because they could harbor an invasive pest or disease.

Our country has laws that prohibit or restrict the entry of certain agricultural products from abroad, such as meats and animal products, fresh produce, plants and plant parts, soil, seeds, herbal medicines, live insects and mollusks, and some plant-based handicrafts. These laws protect the United States and its Territories from agricultural pests and diseases that could harm our Nation's agricultural and natural resources and cause 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 protecting the environment and our food supply.

You Are the "Importer of Record"

As a 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 and agriculture specialists; you may also face steep fines under applicable USDA regulations.

To avoid such outcomes, here are some guidelines for receiving products from outside the U.S. mainland:

- **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 shopping online, on social media, or in mobile applications, 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. Sellers in other countries 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 you prefer to shop with online stores and companies in other countries, contact your nearest APHIS office first.
- **Stop repeat shipments.** If your package arriving from family or friends is seized by CBP or USDA 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. Import requirements vary depending on the specific commodity and country of origin. You can find this information in our Agricultural Commodity Import Requirements (ACIR) database at acir.aphis.usda.gov.

- **Know the difference: mail and express courier vs. hand-carry.** Importing agricultural products through the mail is not the same as you carrying them into the country through an airport or land border. Different procedures apply. To learn more about traveling with food and other agricultural products, go to www.aphis.usda.gov/travel.

Plants and Seeds for Planting

Live plants and seeds (including bulbs, roots and other propagative materials) from other countries are allowed into the United States if accompanied by a phytosanitary certificate issued by agriculture officials in the originating 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 an online seller or company is unwilling to obtain a phytosanitary certificate or tells you that one is not needed for your purchase, you should cancel your order because 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 buying seeds with special requirements, like SLOS permits, is available at www.aphis.usda.gov/plant-imports/how-to-import.

In addition to a phytosanitary certificate, some plants and seeds may require further paperwork such as permits, treatment, or inspection. Information on buying plants and seeds online is available at www.aphis.usda.gov/plant-imports/buy-plants-seeds-online.

Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Many fresh fruits and vegetables are prohibited entry into the United States. Even though many imported fruits and vegetables can be found in U.S. retail stores, they often cannot be imported directly for personal use. 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 could lead to a fruit fly outbreak that might cost the United States millions of dollars to eradicate.

Plant Products, Insects, and Soil

Many common dried or processed plant products—such as citrus peel, wooden crafts and home décor, and certain herbs for tea or medicine—also have special entry requirements, depending on the country from which they ship. In addition, an APHIS-issued permit must be obtained prior to importing live insects and snails in all life stages, including eggs. Soil imported for any reason must meet strict entry requirements 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 and agriculture specialists at the port of entry.

Meat, Animals, and Animal Products and Byproducts

Meat, animals, and animal products and byproducts can carry diseases into the United States such as African swine fever, classical swine fever, foot-and-mouth disease, Newcastle disease, and highly pathogenic avian influenza. Outbreaks of these diseases would not only sicken animals but could also threaten human health and cause significant economic losses. For example, the 2022 outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza led to the death of over 60 million chickens, turkeys, and other commercially produced birds in 47 States and cost Federal and State governments billions of dollars to mitigate.

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 mail from another country, check with APHIS on eligibility and restrictions.

Contact Us

To see whether a specific agricultural item is allowed to be shipped to the United States, or to report the possibility that something has entered illegally, contact your nearest **APHIS office:**

- For plants, plant products, insects and soil: www.aphis.usda.gov/planthealth/sphd
- For meat, animals, and animal products and byproducts:: www.aphis.usda.gov/contact/animal-animal-product-trade-contacts

The ACIR database provides detailed information on the regulations and requirements for importing various plant materials. It allows you to search for specific plant species and review the necessary permit and conditions. You can access the database at acir.aphis.usda.gov.

For further questions about importing live animals, contact **APHIS, Veterinary Services, Live Animal Import and Export** at 301-851-3300 or email laie@usda.gov. For questions about importing meat, animal products, or animal byproducts, contact **APHIS Veterinary Services, Animal Product Import and Export** at 301-851-3300 or email apie@usda.gov.

Report agricultural smuggling by visiting www.aphis.usda.gov/sitc.

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