

Homegrown vegetables and fruit can taste much better than those usually available in markets, but to be at their best, they need to be harvested at the right time.

Many vegetables, because the process of ripening continues even after they are picked, should either be used immediately or stored in the refrigerator to slow down this process. This is especially true of tomatoes, sweet corn, snap beans, summer squash, beets and cucumbers. The sugars of some vegetables, like corn and peas, change to starch very rapidly unless refrigerated immediately.

Vegetables and fruit should be picked at the proper time to assure the best quality, and the optimum vitamin and mineral content. Vegetables and fruit left in the garden or on the tree too long will often become fibrous, tough or rotten.

Harvesting vegetables at the proper stage will also tend to keep the plants producing, since plants which do not have an abundance of leaves or fruit to develop and carry through to maturity will be able to produce more of both.

To harvest each vegetable and fruit at its peak of tenderness and sweetness, it is important to know when the best time is for each crop. The following methods have been determined through much trial and error, and should serve to facilitate this sometimes mysterious process.

VEGETABLES

ASPARAGUS – Harvest the second year after planting for a 2-3 week period. The next year harvest can be extended to 4-6 weeks and subsequently to 8-12 weeks. Harvest spears when they are 6-8 inches tall, before the tips begin to separate. Snapping the spears off at the soil level will avoid the danger of cutting young roots and damaging the crowns. Asparagus loses quality quickly. Eat within a few hours after harvest or refrigerate.

BEANS – Begin harvest when pods reach 3 inches long, while they are still young and tender. The beans or seeds inside the pods should just be beginning to bulge the sides.

A snap bean ready to harvest should break easily with a snap. Harvest frequently during warm weather to keep plants in full yield. When picking, be careful not to break up the plants. Use two hands. Pull the pods with one hand while holding the fruiting stems with the other.

For dry beans allow the pods to remain on the plants until they turn brown and crispy. The beans can be removed from the pods and allowed to dry completely before storing.

BEETS – Harvest when they are 1 to 1-1/2 inches in diameter. At this stage both tops and roots can be cooked together. Beets larger than 3 inches will become woody.

BROCCOLI – Harvest before the buds separate or show color. Cut center heads while the buds are still tight. After the center head is cut, smaller side shoots develop which will extend the harvest season up to a month or more. Harvesting the side shoots will keep the plants producing until the weather becomes too warm and causes bolting.

CABBAGE – Heads are usable as soon as they are fairly firm. Heads will split if over mature. Cutting just under the head to leave some basal leaves may cause small lateral heads to develop as a bonus.

CARROTS – Harvest when carrots reach finger size and continue. Thin randomly. Remaining carrots will grow larger.

CAULIFLOWER – For pure white heads, tie outer leaves together as soon as the head reaches a diameter of 2-3 inches. Examine the heads every few days to determine when to tie

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and harvest. Harvest when compact and fairly smooth; bud segments should not be allowed to separate.

CHARD – Harvest anytime the plants develop 4-5 leaves. Cut full grown leaves 1-2 inches from the **COLLARDS** – Harvest by cutting the entire plant or cut the bottom leaves periodically leaving the central growing point to produce more leaves. Do not damage the bud or production will be slowed or halted completely.

CORN – When the kernels are plump and in the milk stage, when silks are dry and brown, sweet corn is ready. The cobs should feel well-filled out and tight at the tip. Kernels will be as large as they'll get, but they are still soft, tender and filled with a milky juice. Try not to peel husks away from the corn to see if it's ready. A little experience will enable the gardener to feel the corn for tightness and readiness. Cook immediately as the sugar in the kernels rapidly turns to starch and consequent toughness, otherwise refrigerate as soon as possible.

CUCUMBERS – When fruits are young and green and seeds are still soft, harvest. A yellowish skin color indicates the seeds are mature and the fruit is beyond eating. Pick every other day. Cucumbers for sweet pickles should be 2-4 inches; those used for dill should be picked at 5-6 inches. Slicers should grow to 6-8 inches. Fruits which become overmature should be removed from the vines and thrown away. Leaving them inhibits flower and new fruit production.

KOHLRABI – Harvest when enlarged stems are 1-1/2 to 3 inches in diameter. If allowed to become larger they will become tough, stringy and woody.

LETTUCE – The time to harvest lettuce depends on the type. Head lettuce is ready when the head becomes firm. Bibb and leaf lettuce are harvested when the plants are large enough to use. If you have limited number of leaf lettuce plants, pull the outer leaves for use, leaving the plant to continue producing leaves. This way, leaf lettuce can be harvested over a long period of time.

ONIONS – Green onions or scallions should be pulled whenever they get big enough to seem worthwhile. They should be eaten immediately or refrigerated.

Onions harvested for storage should not be pulled until they are mature. After the tops fall over, push over the remaining greens to hasten maturity. They can be dug in a few days and must be cured before storage. Allow to dry until the tops and outer scales become dry. Drying can be accomplished in the garden on top of the soil or if there is a possibility of rain underneath a shelter

ground. Do not injure the growing point in the center or the plant will not continue to produce new leaves. Very old leaves are tough and stringy. Keep a few leaves on the plants so the plant can manufacture food to keep producing. In a dry, well-ventilated area. After the tops are fully dried, cut them off about 1-1/2 to 2 inches above the bulb. The onions can then be placed in mesh bags or crates for storage in a dry area with air temperatures of 35-50°. Sprouting and rotting indicate the storage temperature is too high and conditions too moist.

PARSNIPS – Parsnips will generally be of higher quality if allowed to remain in the ground until late fall or early winter. This increases the sugar content and enhances the flavor considerably. In storage they should not be allowed to dry out. Store in a moist medium such as sand, in a cool environment.

PEAS – Pick when pods appear well filled but before they begin to harden or fade in color. Pods should swell too nearly round. Pick every 3 to 5 days. Allowing mature pods to remain on the vines reduces production. Peas mature over 7-10 days. Pick just prior to eating. Sugar conversion to starch begins rapidly after picking. Edible pod peas or sugar peas are picked at 2-3 inches. If pods remain on the plant longer, the seeds harden and the pods will toughen.

PEPPERS – Pick whenever they reach a size large enough to use, usually while still green or yellow. They may be allowed to turn red on the plant at which point they become somewhat sweeter.

PUMPKINS AND WINTER SQUASH – Harvest after the vines dry up, but before heavy frost. The skin should be tough and the correct color for the variety. With a sharp knife cut the stems leaving a two-inch stub on the fruit. Store in a warm, dry area. Don't wash before storage.

RADISHES – Radishes should be harvested at the size of a dime. Large radishes will be woody or hollow and pithy. Often the tips of the roots will push above the soil when they are ready. Winter radishes, which grow and mature in the fall, can be pulled whenever they reach usable size.

RHUBARB – Rhubarb may be picked for the first time the year after planting for only two weeks. In subsequent years, the harvest can last for 6 weeks. Snap off the stems at the base after

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stems are 12 inches. Pick only the older leaves and not more than two-thirds of the stalks on any one plant at a time. Allow the young stalks to continue to grow. Trim the leaves off the stalks and discard as they contain oxalic acid, which is toxic to humans.

SPINACH – Harvest from the time plants have 5-6 leaves until just before seed stalks develop. Simply cut the entire plant off above the soil level.

SUMMER SQUASH (Zucchini, crookneck, etc.)

Pick when young and tender. Yellow types should still be pale yellow when picked. The skin should still be soft when punctured by a fingernail; if not, the fruit is too old. Harvest 2-3 times per week. Pick and discard fruit which has begun to mature.

TOMATOES – For best quality and flavor, tomatoes should be allowed to ripen on the vine. Green tomatoes can be picked and stored in a cool, moist dark place. To ripen, bring into a warm room. Light is not essential for ripening. In late fall entire plants along with their green fruits can be lifted and stored in a cool, frost-free area such as a garage or basement. Fruit can be ripened as above.

TURNIPS AND RUTABAGAS – These root crops can be harvested when two inches in diameter. Turnips, allowed to get much larger, will be hollow and pithy. Rutabagas do not demonstrate this tendency and may be left in the ground for use during winter.

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FRUITS

APPLES – Harvest when the fruit is fully colored for the variety. Reds should have a good red color. They can be picked at this stage for storage. Leaving them on the tree for a few more days will give them more flavor and quality for fresh eating. At this point some fruit will begin to drop on their own from the tree. On apples which are not solid red at maturity, the ground color is a good indicator of readiness. The ground color should show considerable yellowing.

Tasting the fruit is often a good indicator of readiness. The fruit should be firm, juicy and sweet but with some tartness still evident. Immature apples tend to be astringent and puckery if picked too early. They will not ripen properly and will shrivel and lose flavor.

Summer varieties ripen over a two-week period and several pickings may be needed. Fruits in trees of late varieties tend to ripen all at once.

PEARS – Pears should not ripen on the tree. Pick while still firm before any marked ripening occurs, or they will develop grittiness and the inner flesh will become discolored and soft. If picked too green they will never attain their optimum flavor and will tend to shrivel in storage.

Pears should just begin to turn from a dark, leaf-green color to a light yellowish green. The seeds will be brown. There should be a springiness to the flesh as opposed to the rock-hard consistency of immature fruit. The flesh should give a little when squeezed. Stems should separate easily from the spurs with an upward twist. Hold stored fruit at 30°-32°F to retard ripening. Ripening will occur if exposed to 70°F temperatures for a few days.

Asian pears should be allowed to ripen on the tree. Use the taste test.

PEACHES – Watch the ground color, *not* the amount of red on peaches. The ground color should be yellow when picked. The flesh should give under finger pressure when ripe enough. The fruit should separate easily from the branch with a slight lift and twist motion. If picked too

early, the flesh will remain rubbery and never soften. They will not become sweet. If allowed to over-ripen, they will lose sweetness.

PLUMS – With both Japanese and European varieties of plums, the taste test is probably the best way to determine readiness for harvest. They should just be beginning to soften. The taste test should reveal fruit which are soft, sweet and juicy. Watching the ground color on many European varieties is often a help. It becomes yellowish in contrast to the dull greenish color of the immature state. Ripeness of Italian prunes should be determined by taste. Japanese plums will often look highly colored before they are ripe, so color should not be used to assess ripeness; use the taste test.

APRICOTS – Apricots must be completely yellow over the entire surface but not too soft. They should be picked while still fairly firm. If picked too early, they will never develop optimum sweetness.

CHERRIES – Cherries should be dead ripe on the tree before picking. They must be juicy and sweet but still firm. The darker varieties should become very dark before picking. Use the taste test.

FIGS – Figs should be the correct color for the variety, somewhat soft and when the fruit is picked there should be no milky sap oozing from the stem. Those that do ooze sap are not ripe.

GRAPES – Use the taste test for table grapes. Don't rely on color alone. When the color looks good, taste a few from the ends of the bunches. If they are sweet, they are ready. The seeds should be brown.

STRAWBERRIES – During the season, pick the patch every day or every other day. This is best done in the morning while the berries are still cool. They should be harvested when fully red.

RASPBERRIES – Raspberries of any color are ready when they separate easily from the stem.

BLACKBERRIES – Often look ripe before they are. They must be completely back and soft. Handle berries carefully.

BLUEBERRIES – Use the taste test before picking. Fully colored and plump blueberries should be harvested weekly.

GOOSEBERRIES AND CURRENTS – For table use, harvest these fruits when they are soft, well-colored and tasty. The taste test is important. For making jelly and

pies, slightly under-ripe, immature gooseberries are preferred.

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