

When to Harvest Vegetables

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July prime time to pick them at their peak

While some harvesting is done earlier in spring, July is the month where abundance rejoices in the garden. Picking vegetables at their peak of quality will greatly improve their taste.

Ripening times vary widely among vegetables. Some vegetables, e.g. sweet corn and English cucumbers, are highly perishable, while others, e.g. potatoes and winter squash, can be stored for long periods of time if their outer skin has been properly hardened to protect the succulent core from rotting. Tomatoes can be left on the vine until fully ripened or taken off when partially mature and placed on a window sill to ripen, although they may be less sweet. Peas and beans can easily become tough if not harvested when small and tender. Remember that bigger is not always better. Physiological processes affecting texture, fiber and consistency occur in plants and permanently changes their taste, appearance and quality during maturation.

Several garden practices can be incorporated to maximize the quality of your garden produce:

- Check your garden each day and pick vegetables as soon as they ripen. Vegetables continue to grow and take up plant energy and before you realize it, they are overgrown. Your food will be at its best flavor and tenderness when harvested at the appropriate time and removing these vegetables can often encourage the plant to produce more later in the season.
- Keep track of your seed varieties, when they were planted and the days to harvest which are shown on the seed packet. Many cultivars are bred for a specific characteristic like size, flavor or disease resistance. Don't confuse your early squash varieties, which may be ready to eat sooner in the season but do not overwinter well, with your late season types bred to take longer to mature and store better. Your bush beans, pole beans and Scarlet runner beans all mature at very different times and your pickling cucumbers will look markedly different from your market cucumbers when ripe. Seed packets and catalogs can contain important information on signs to look for when a plant is at its prime.
- Care for plants properly and look for and remove signs of trouble. Consistent watering is a crucial factor for all young plants so check often and water deeply. Avoid bruising or damaging vegetables, as this causes decay. Stepping on vines or breaking stems creates openings through which diseases can enter the plant. Remove yellowing leaves and rotting fruit. Pick off damaged produce such as tomatoes with blossom end rot or those cracking from too much rain. This leaves more energy for the healthy fruit to mature properly. Keep an eye out for bug or slug damage and fix the problem using appropriate horticultural practices before things spread further around your garden.



These onions are good to go for fresh onions now, but if you want onions to put up, they need to ripen a bit longer. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

- Harvest correctly. Vegetables are at their freshest in the morning when the weather is cooler so harvest before the mid-day sun starts to heat them up. Most vegetables should be kept cool and out of direct sunlight immediately after picking and until processed or consumed. Onions are an exception because they should be dried in the sun before storing. Many root vegetables such as carrots should be dug rather than pulled straight from the soil so they don't break off, while peas, beans and tomatoes can be picked from their vines. Broccoli, Brussels sprouts and cabbages should be cut off with a knife or pruning tool.
- Store appropriately. Even after harvest, respiration and other life processes continue, and in most cases a slowing of these processes will increase the shelf life of the vegetable. There are various temperatures and practices which will optimize storage life. This subject will be discussed in more depth in a future article.

Here are a few quick tips for harvesting vegetables at their peak:

- Asparagus needs to be snapped off or cut at ground level when stalks are six to ten inches tall. Harvest over a period of 6-8 weeks before allowing the plant to go to seed. This allows energy to feed the roots for next year's crop.

- Snap beans should be picked just as they are beginning to fill out. They should snap easily when bent in two. Green beans should not be picked when wet to avoid spreading disease. Keep up regular picking to encourage the vine to keep producing. Garden pea pods should be light green and filled with round but tender peas.



These beans are ready to be harvested. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

- Check your root crop varieties, i.e. carrots, turnips and parsnips, for estimated days to harvest before digging a sample. Gently loosen the soil and remove one to determine if ready. Harvest beets between 1–3 inches in diameter for best tenderness. Beet greens also make good additions to salads or when cooked.
- Cool crops are planted in spring for a fall crop. Broccoli should be harvested before the flowers start to open. Pick every 3-4 days. Brussels sprouts should be bright green and firm and are picked from the lower plant when they are between 1-1.5 inches. Cabbage and lettuce heads should be firm at harvest. Optimum size will depend on your specific variety. Swiss chard is best cut from the outer leaves when 6-10". Kale can be picked throughout the season but is best in cooler weather. Use the cut-and-come-again method.
- Use scissors to cut leaf lettuce from the outer leaves, letting more grow from the inside. Look for bolt resistant varieties and plant at two-week intervals. Row covers can protect the plant from bolting as the season heats up.

- Harvest summer squash when they are 4-7 inches long and skin is soft and rubbery. Check often! Market cucumbers are best when young with smooth, firm fruit.
- Corn should be picked just before consuming. Feel for full, rounded kernels beneath the husk, check that the silk at the top of the ear is drying out, and look that a milky sap is produced when you pop a kernel with your fingernail.
- For green onions, harvest when they are about the size of a pencil. Larger onions are ready when their tops start to bend over and yellow. Leeks are harvested when they are between one-half and 1-1/2 inches in diameter. Garlic is ready when one-third of the top has died back.
- Pick tomatoes when they are fully colored but firm. Peppers will vary with variety and how hot you prefer them. Check your seed packet. Eggplant is best when slightly immature with shiny, firm fruit.
- New potatoes can be dug when flowers form on the plant. Wait for full growth die back to harvest mature potatoes for storage, giving them time to form a firm hardened skin.
- Once you cannot easily sink your fingernail into the winter squash or pumpkin, the fruit is ripe enough to store. Leave a few inches of stem on the plant. Usually the vines are drying at this point.

Happy eating!

RESOURCES:

- “Harvesting Vegetables, Guidelines for optimum harvest”, College of Agriculture and Bioresources, University of Saskatchewan.
<http://gardening.usask.ca/articles-how-to/harvesting-vegetables.php>
- “Harvesting Cool Season Vegetables”, Dr. Leonard Perry, Horticulture Professor Emeritus, University of Vermont.
<https://pss.uvm.edu/ppp/articles/harvsprveg.html>
- “Harvesting Vegetables – How to Know When It’s Time to Pick”, Marie Iannotti, The Spruce, updated 2/09/19.
<https://www.thespruce.com/when-to-harvest-vegetables-1403402>
- “Harvest Vegetables at Their Peak for Best Quality”, Don Janssen, UNL Extension Educator, University of Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County.
<https://lancaster.unl.edu/hort/articles/2008/peakflavor.shtml>
- “Harvesting Vegetables”, Burpee
<https://www.burpee.com/gardenadvicecenter/standard-articles-and-videos/gardening-how-to-articles/harvesting-vegetables/article10387.html>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.