

Harvest Time

Are your green beans tough? Are your tomatoes mushy? For the best texture and flavor, you need to pick your vegetables when they are at their peak. For some crops, this means checking almost daily. Others are more forgiving. Here are a few hints on how to tell when your vegetables have reached perfection.

Beans need to be checked daily. Green beans are ready when the pods have filled out, but the seeds are still tiny. This usually occurs two to four weeks after bloom. Edamame should still be bright green and the beans almost touching in the pod.

Beets are more forgiving and can be harvested when the roots are merely 2 inches in diameter or the size of a baseball. Beet leaves are tasty when they are still bright green and tender.

Broccoli should be harvested before you see yellow flowers, while the buds are tight. Cut the central stalk at a slant (to prevent rot) a few inches below the base of the head. The plant should produce new side shoots to be harvested later.

Cabbage can be picked any time after developing heads become solid and firm. If a cabbage head splits, it is still edible but will not store very long,

Carrots hold very well in the ground into the winter and can be harvested over a long period of time. The sugar content heightens as the carrot matures. The tiny carrots culled as a result of thinning can be used in salads.

Chard leaves are best when young, while still brightly colored and tender. Pick the young leaves from the center and allow the plant to keep growing new leaves. Chard will keep in the garden through the winter.

Corn should be harvested about 15 to 20 days after the first silk strands appear. When the silks begin to turn dry and brown, partially peel back the husks and pierce a kernel with your thumbnail. If a milky juice squirts out, the corn is ready to eat.

Cucumbers need to be checked daily. They grow very fast and need to be harvested to ensure continued production. They should be filled out enough to be crisp and juicy and measure 6 to 9 inches long, depending on the specific variety. Once they start to yellow (unless we are talking about lemon cucumbers), they are over the hill.



Eggplant past its prime is soft, pithy and laden with seeds, which gives it the bitter taste. Eggplant harvested while young and firm is sweet and tender. Use pruning shears to harvest since a strong pull will injure the plant.

Kale can be harvested about 40 days after planting. However, a frost really sweetens and enhances the flavor, so wait until then if you can. Remove outer leaves as needed and allow the plant to keep producing. Kale will keep in the garden through the winter.

Kohlrabi is best when the bulbs are small. Some varieties of kohlrabi will get tough as they get older. Start picking kohlrabi bulbs when they are a few inches in diameter.

Leeks can be harvested any time the stem is an inch in diameter or larger. They have the mildest and most delicate flavor when small. Leeks can remain in the garden up to March.

Lettuce can be harvested over several weeks. Pick outer leaves and leave the main head for later harvest. Lettuce should always be harvested before the center begins to elongate, which means that flowering will incur shortly. After flowering, the lettuce will taste bitter.

Melons are more of a challenge to know when they are perfectly ripe. On some cantaloupes, the "netting" that overlays the skin becomes more pronounced. On watermelons, the surface of the fruit loses its gloss, the side touching the ground changes color, and most importantly, the tendril closest to the fruit turns brown. Thumping as a measure of ripeness is not guaranteed to work, no matter what your grandmother taught you.

Onions can be harvested in either the scallion stage or the bulb stage. Green onions are best when tops are 6 to 8 inches tall and stems are the thickness of a pencil. For maximum sized bulbs, wait until more than half the tops have fallen down, then push over the remaining tops. A week later, harvest the bulbs and set in the sun for a day or two, but cover at night. Cure the bulbs with tops intact for about a week in a sheltered, dry area. Then cut the tops an inch above the bulbs, trim off the roots and store the onions in a well-ventilated dry, cool and dark location. Many onions will store for months. Some, like walla-wallas do not store well and must be chopped and frozen.



Peas are best harvested in the early morning or early evening. Pick snap peas when plump and well colored. Pick snow peas before the pods fill out and they are tender and thin. Pick shell peas when the pods are bright green and fully filled.

Peppers can be harvested in the immature green stage or when they change color. Various varieties turn red, gold, yellow, orange, or even purple. Hot peppers usually take on more flavor when their color changes as they mature. The more you pick, the more the plant produces. So eat more peppers!

Potatoes are ready to harvest two weeks after the tops die down. This delay gives the skin time to toughen for long-term storage. After drying in the sun for a few hours, cure the potatoes for two weeks at 50 to 60 degrees under shelter, in a well-ventilated area with high humidity. Then store at 40 to 50 degrees. Baby potatoes can be harvested without disturbing the entire plant by feeling around under the soil at the end of a row.

Summer Squash is best when harvested small, while the skins are tender. Yeah -- we all know this but we also know you can check the plant in the morning and have a torpedo-sized zucchini at the end of the day!

Tomatoes are best when picked between the semi-firm and semi-soft stages, when the fruits are fully colored. Second best is to pick a few days early and allow them to finish ripening indoors. Never store in the refrigerator unless you like a mushy texture. Let's face it - any tomato from the garden, even an overripe one, is better than one from the grocery store.



Winter Squash is ready to harvest when the skin resists a puncture with your thumbnail. Also look for a deepening color and a hardened stem. Harvest after the first light frost to enhance sweetness, but before a hard frost. Cut (do not pull) the squash from the vine, leaving two inches of the stem attached. Do not pick up by the stem as a broken stem will cause the fruit to rot. Wipe off the fruit and cure in a warm place at 80 degrees for 10 days. Once cured, store in a cool, dry location at 50 to 55 degrees. Winter squash will keep for many months if handled and stored properly.

References

Nelson, Vern. *The Oregonian Home & Garden Northwest*.

Wetherbee, Kris. Pick for Peak Flavor. *Ruralite*, August 2006, pgs 12-14.

Photos by Master Gardener Karen Palmer.