



## Harvest Tips - Fruits & Vegetables

The most anticipated moment for summer gardeners is harvesting the *fruits of their labors*. Most gardeners in their eager anticipation to feast sometimes harvest too early, or too late. The goal is to harvest vegetables when the quality is the highest. After all, it is the quality of garden produce that sets it apart from store bought produce.

Most vegetables reach their peak flavor when they're young and tender. Many vegetables not picked at the proper time are stringy, woody, or tasteless. All the hard work and expense of growing the crop has been lost. Try these strategies for the freshest, tastiest home-grown vegetables.



**Asparagus:** Harvest shoots when they are 1/4" to 1/2" thick and are 6" to 8" long. Cut them, or break them off, at or below ground level. Be careful not to injure the other shoots around them. Asparagus shoots may need to be harvested every other day in the early spring and as often as twice a day when the weather gets warm. Do not let the shoots get too long or the flavor and quality will be greatly reduced. Stop harvesting asparagus when the shoots begin to get smaller in diameter, when the weather starts to get hot, when the flavor starts to diminish, or when the spears start to get woody.



**Beans:** Green beans are ready to pick if the pods are smooth and evenly green. Snap beans are best if they snap easily when bent in half. Once snap bean pods start to turn yellow and the beans begin to corrugate the pod, the beans will be tough. Yellow bean cultivars should also be picked before they appear corrugated.

**Beets:** Beets may be harvested as soon as the root reaches 1 inch in diameter. Beets are their best at 2.5 inches diameter, but over 3.5 inches they are tough and only suitable in soups. Use the tender, inner leaves for beet greens; the outer leaves are often tough and stringy.

**Broccoli:** Cut broccoli when the individual flower buds are still in tight clusters. Once flower buds open, the broccoli has a strong undesirable flavor. The first harvest should consist of the central head and 5" of stem. Broccoli can be harvested for several more weeks, but it will consist of side shoots and 4" to 6" of stem. Pick broccoli every 3 to 4 days so the crop does not get out of hand.



**Brussels sprouts:** Start picking the lower sprouts at 1" in size. The sprouts should be bright green and firm. If the weather stays cool, there may be more than 100 of the tiny cabbage heads per plant.

**Cabbage:** Begin harvesting cabbage heads when they are small, and continue until head size reaches 12 inches. The heads should be firm at harvest. Waiting too late to

harvest may result in split heads. Maturity may take 2 to 3 months, depending on the weather.

**Carrots.** Carrots are easy to harvest. Just pull them whenever you want them. Carrots are edible at all sizes; even the ones you remove as you thin them. The tops can be tossed in a salad. If carrots aren't all pulled before winter, cover them with sufficient mulch to keep the ground from freezing and leave them in the ground until you need them. Cold temperatures make carrots sweeter. If carrots are allowed to get too old, they will be woody.



**Cauliflower:** For the best flavor, the head segments should be tightly packed, white or ivory in color and free of brown spots. When cauliflower heads start to form, tie leaves together at the top to form a tee pee. This keeps the sun out and prevents the head from yellowing. Yellow cauliflower is bitter.

**Corn:** Harvesting corn at the right time is vital for the best flavor. Of all the vegetables, corn is most often harvested too late. The first thing to watch for is pollination which is indicated by clouds of pollen erupting when you walk through the corn patch. About 3 weeks later, the silk will turn brown. Maturity can be tested by peeling the husks back. Pop a kernel an inch or two from the tip of the ear with a fingernail. If the fluid is watery, it is still too early pick; if the fluid is milky, the corn is at its best; if the fluid is the consistency of toothpaste the corn has gone starchy and is only suited for creamed corn or used in chowders. The milky kernel stage only lasts for a few days. After picking, cool corn cobs as quickly as possible, by plunging the ears into ice water and storing in the refrigerator. Once cobs are picked, they immediately start turning sugars into starches, especially in warm temperatures.



**Cucumbers.** Harvest cucumbers when they are plump and an edible size, but not too large. Large cucumbers can



become bitter. Check plants daily because they can grow rapidly. Except for lemon cucumbers, don't let cucumbers turn yellow or the fruit will be tough and will have hard seeds. Do not leave mature fruit on the vine. Once cucumbers turn yellow, a tough skin and tough seeds are formed. The plant will also stop producing new fruit.

**Garlic** Fall planted garlic is ready to harvest late-June to mid-July. Spring planted garlic is ready when 1/3 of the top has died back. Garlic requires a curing period of about 20 days at 75°F (or 10-14 days at 80°F) with lots of air movement.



**Eggplant.** Eggplant is ripe when the skin is shiny and a slight depression remains when you press gently with a finger. Harvest before the skin turns dull again.



**Lettuce.** The outer leaves should be harvested before yellowing or browning occurs. If the stand is dense, entire plants may be harvested, giving the remaining plants more room to develop. Head lettuce should be picked *firm*. As semi-heading lettuce types do not form a firm center, harvest as soon as a soft head forms.

**Melons.** Different melons show ripeness in different ways. A cantaloupe will have prominent ribs and the netting will turn beige. The fruit should be sweet and juicy. Some melons will change color: a crenshaw will change from green to yellow; a honeydew will turn silvery-green with a flush of yellow. Another test to see if a melon is ripe is to smell it. Many ripe melons are extremely fragrant. Try pressing on the stem, next to the fruit. If the stem separates easily from the fruit, it is probably ripe.



**Onions.** Harvest green onions when the stem is a thick as a pencil. If onions are still actively growing by the beginning of September, bend the tops over to start a bulb curing process. A heavy frost will ruin onion bulbs. If onions are not curing on their own, or if conditions are unfavorable for outdoor drying, spread bulbs out on the floor in a warm, dry building with a forced flow of warm air.

**Leeks.** Leeks should be harvested when the stem is 1" in diameter. Unlike their onion and shallot cousins, leek tops do not die back as the crop matures.

**Peas:** Harvest peas just before the pods are fully round in cross section. Pick snow peas when pods are still flat and about 2 to 3 inches long. Pods longer than 4 inches are too fibrous. Pick carefully so you do not break the vines. Harvest regularly. Do not leave overripe pods on the plants.

**Pumpkins:** Wait until the fruit is a deep orange. The easiest method to determine ripeness is to sink a fingernail into the rind. If the fingernail easily penetrates, the pumpkin is ripe enough for storage. By this time, the vines will usually be drying. If the pumpkin is not mature, leave it on the vine until after a light frost. However, if average daily temperatures are below 60°F growth is re-



duced or eliminated. If a heavy frost threatens, harvest and place the pumpkin in room temperature for a few weeks to harden the rind. Pumpkins may be stored at 50°F.

**Peppers.** Pick peppers whenever they are big enough for your personal taste. Most peppers are considered mature when the stems snap easily off the branch. Pepper plants are somewhat brittle and have shallow root systems, so don't tug too hard or you might break the



branches or pull plants from the ground. Peppers that are allowed to stay on the plant until they turn color (red, orange, purple, etc.) have the most developed flavor, whether they are sweet or hot varieties.

**Potatoes.** As soon as potato plants are through flowering, in early summer, you can dig some as small "new potatoes." Leave the rest of them in the ground until late summer when the plants have died back. After the plants die, dig the potatoes and let them harden off for a few days before putting them in storage. If the winter is mild and you have well-drained soil, you can leave potatoes in the ground, under a layer of mulch, and dig them as needed.



**Radishes:** Although radishes are easy to grow, knowing when to harvest is the key to perfect radishes with crisp roots and mild flavor instead of hot-as-fire and as pithy-as-corks. Thinning and eating may start when radishes are the size of marbles. Radishes may be harvested up to 1 inch in diameter. Beyond that size radishes are pithy and can be strong flavored. Radishes that have been left in the garden too long will be fit only for the compost pile. Planting seeds among slower growing vegetables means double harvests- radishes first; onions, beets or broccoli later.



**Squash - Summer.** Zucchini squash is perhaps the most prolific summer squash. They grow and ripen fast. They can be eaten at any stage of development. Check plants daily and harvest the fruit when it is small: do not let the fruit grow large and let the seeds mature. Seed development stops the formation of new fruit. You're more likely to have a manageable supply over a longer period of time. If you have too many squash all at once, it's better to compost a few small zucchinis, as well as the huge ones, and keep new ones coming on all summer. Crookneck and other summer squash are not as prolific as zucchini squash, but should be treated in a similar manner. Summer squash that grows too large has a hard skin and large inedible seeds.



**Squash - Winter.** Many winter squash can be harvested and eaten as soon as they reach a desirable size during the late-summer; similar to summer squash. If you plan to store your squash leave the fruit on the vine until they reach a good size, have deep



well-developed color, and the rind is hard enough to resist scratching by a fingernail. Spaghetti squash is usually harvested when a golden yellow color and banana squash is picked when golden orange. Leave a two-inch piece of stem on the fruit when harvesting, to help prevent rotting from the stem end. Wipe each fruit with a 10 percent bleach solution before storing, to kill mold and mildew spores. Store where it's cool and dry.

**Tomatoes.** Nobody needs to be told when tomatoes are ripe. They turn red (or yellow, orange, purple, or white, depending on the variety) when they are ready. Many tomatoes ripen over a long period of time so pick regularly. You must harvest tomatoes before they freeze.



Tomatoes can also be picked at the 'ripe-green' stage: The inside will have well-formed seeds embedded in a jelly-like substance. Once they have reached this stage, tomatoes will continue ripening after being harvested. Tomatoes harvested before they reach this stage will not ripen. Let green tomatoes continue to ripen indoors by laying them out, without touching each other, in a well-ventilated area between 60° to 70° F. Do not put them on a sunny window sill, because tissue damage results from sunburn and excessive heat.



**Watermelons.** It is very hard to tell when a watermelon is ripe. Check the fruit for bee stings. If the bees are starting to enjoy the watermelon it is probably ripe. Tap the watermelon with your knuckle. If it has a dull thud it is still immature. If it has a hollow sound it is probably ripe. If the bottom of the watermelon, where the fruit touches the ground, is yellow it is probably ripe. Check the tendril located at the point where the fruit is attached to the vine. If the tendril has turned brown and shriveled it is probably ripe.



## Hastening the Harvest

The first killing frost of the year is usually in mid-October. If your garden is being uncooperative, many plants are still producing new fruit and the old fruit is not ripening, and the end of the season is approaching, you can speed up the ripening of the garden slowpokes by cutting back on water.



You can remove flowers and small fruits that don't have a chance of growing large enough to harvest before the season ends. You can also pinch back the growing tips of the plants to stop further growth.



Plants treated in this manner will put their energy into ripening the existing produce instead of trying to produce more fruit.

## Fruit Harvest Tips

**Apples.** Fruit approaching maturity may be broken from the spur easily. Do not pull an apple downward or you may damage the spur. Twist the apple upwards with a rotating motion, the apple should separate from the spur easily. When a few 'non-wormy' apples fall to the ground, you know that is a sign that the rest of the fruit is nearly ripe. Softness and flavor are also useful in judging maturity. When an apple becomes slightly soft, juicy, and develops characteristic flavor, it is mature. Do not let an apple stay on the tree long enough to freeze.



**Apricots.** Apricots develop a delectable flavor when allowed to ripen fully on the tree. A single tree may ripen its fruit over a period of about three weeks. If you plan to can or store fruit, pick the fruit when it is firm-ripe, before the fruit skin has developed its typical apricot color. When stored in a cool place, fruit will keep fairly well for another one or two weeks. Stored fruit will not have the sprightly flavor of tree-ripened apricots.



**Cherries.** Pick cherries when fully ripe, they do not ripen after they are picked. Pick with stems left on the fruit. They store much better with stems on than with stems removed. After harvest, cherries usually will store for up to 10 days, if cool and dry.



If you plan to use fruit for canning or other processing, strip cherries from trees without the stems. This method is faster and easier but can be more messy. Because of the cherry fruit fly, all cherries should be picked within a few days of the last spraying.

**Peaches and Nectarines.** Generally the best peach or nectarine is tree ripened. Pick the fruit when they are firm-ripe, not soft-ripe. Sugar content and flavor are best when fruit are allowed to come almost to maturity on the tree. Soft-ripe fruit are sweeter but they lose some of their aroma and quickly become over-ripe. A few varieties, especially late-maturing ones, are better if harvested early and allowed to ripen indoors at a moderate temperature. Peaches and nectarines store better if they are harvested firm-ripe and kept cool. Peaches may store up to 14 days in optimal storage conditions.



Peaches and nectarines harvested when too green may shrivel or fail to develop a desirable flavor upon ripening.

Pick peaches hard-ripe, if you want to bottle them, and allow them to soften for two or three days. Fruit will peel more easily after it has softened slightly, and will be more attractive when canned. Scalding the fruit in boiling water also helps the skin peel away easily. Peaches ripen in the approximate order: Red Haven, Golden Jubilee, Elegant Lady, Hale Haven, Early Elberta, Angelus, Suncrest, Elberta, Veteran, Reliance, Halberta, J.H. Hale.

**Pears.** With the exception of Asian pear varieties, pears are best when ripened off the tree. Fruit left on the tree will not develop peak flavor or texture. Pick the fruit when it is green and hard, but at the mature size for the particular variety. A good indication the pears are ready to be picked is when a few 'non-wormy' pears begin to fall off the tree. When you see these pears fall, pick all of the rest of the fruit on that tree. Do not let the pears drop off the tree or they will bruise. Allow the fruit to ripen in a cool, dark place. Put the fruit in a single layer if you have the room and cover them with a towel. Do not stack fruit to ripen if you have the space. Pears ripen a few at a time so be prepared to bottle them every few days.



To harvest pears, lift the fruit up until the stem separates from the spur; do not pull or twist. If the stem does not break easily from the spur, allow the fruit to ripen for a few more days.

**Asian pears** are similar to apples, in that they ripen on the tree and do not need an additional storage period to mature before they are ready to eat. In picking them, look for the color break, when green skin color starts to change to yellow.



**Plums.** For the best quality and flavor, leave plums on the tree until they are firm-ripe. As the plums ripen to soft-ripe they will increase in both sugar content and fragrance, however they will not store long after picking. Not all plums ripen at the same time on the same tree so you may want to pick them every few days. Santa Rosa ripens first, then Elephant Heart and then Satsuma.



**Prunes.** The best guide to ripening is to watch for softening fruit. As soon as the first fruit softens, most of the fruit on the tree will be ready to harvest within a short period of time. Late-maturing varieties, that hang well on the tree, can be picked over a long period. Pick prunes for table use whenever the flavor is acceptable.



Prunes may either fall naturally from the tree or they may be knocked off easily when they reach the proper stage for drying. If you knock them off, wait until a few start to drop naturally then shake the rest off. Any fruit you plan to eat fresh should be hand picked instead of letting them fall. Many varieties of prunes will store from one to three months fresh, and almost indefinitely once dried.

**Grapes.** When you see birds flock to the grape vines in your yard you know that you waited a little too long to start harvesting your grapes. Harvest grapes as soon as they change color, soften, and become aromatic. Grapes should be fully ripe when you pick them; they do not ripen well after harvesting. Many seedless varieties ripen over a long period



of time so you can harvest them for an extended time, if you keep the birds away. Many concord varieties develop a higher sugar content and a better flavor if they have a light-frost before harvest.

## Long Term Storage

A shrewd gardener always plans to grow more vegetables than can be eaten fresh. The surplus of course can be preserved in a variety of ways for consumption during the winter months. Most often these vegetables are processed via canning, freezing, or drying. These are the best ways to handle the long term storage of highly perishable crops such as green beans, tomatoes, peppers, and summer squash.



However, there are several vegetables which can be stored without any processing. These include many root crops as well as pumpkins and winter squash. Though little or no processing is involved, successful long term storage of these vegetable crops depends on their careful harvest and post-harvest handling. Here are some suggestions for dry storage of selected vegetable crops.

For long term storage of any fruit, the key words are cool and ventilated. Cooling slows down the fruit respiration, which slows down senescence. Ventilation keeps ethylene and carbon dioxide from building up to damaging levels.



Some people use old refrigerators set aside just for keeping fruit. If that is impractical, choose an area with low heat that does not go below freezing. A garage or shed, unheated porch, or dry basement area are possible locations.

Avoid direct sunlight or areas with a wide range in temperature. Avoid confined unventilated areas. Fruit can be packed in ordinary boxes lined with newspaper or other padding.

Some people use perforated plastic box liner bags to prevent fruit from drying and shriveling in long storage. Plastic bags without holes for ventilation should not be used as they can cause buildup of trapped ethylene, which will speed up ripening and shorten storage life, while excess moisture contributes to rot.



Avoid storing fruit with open blemishes as they will be a focus for rot. Check periodically for rotten fruits and remove them at once. If picked at the proper time and given good storage, many fruits and vegetables can be enjoyed for months after the harvest season is over.

*The old timers knew what they were talking about when they said that, "one rotten apple spoils the whole barrel".*

### More Resources:

[http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1721&context=extension\\_curall](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1721&context=extension_curall)

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/hil/hil-8108.html>

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