

Harvesting Fruits and Vegetables

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

Because the process of ripening continues even after they are picked, many vegetables 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, such as corn and peas, change to starch very rapidly unless refrigerated immediately.

Vegetables and fruit should be picked at the proper time not only to ensure the best taste, but also to arrive at their 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.

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

In order to harvest each vegetable and fruit at its peak of tenderness and sweetness, it is important for home gardeners to be able to tell when the time is right to harvest. The following methods have been determined through much trial and error and should serve to facilitate this sometimes mysterious process.

Vegetables

Asparagus

Asparagus should begin to be harvested the second year after planting. They can be taken for only 2-3 weeks during this first harvest period. The next year this can be extended to 4-6 weeks and subsequently to 8-12 weeks. Harvest the spears when they are 6-8 inches tall but 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 its quality quickly and should be eaten within a few hours after harvest unless it is quickly refrigerated.

Beans

Start harvesting when the pods reach about three inches long, while they are still young and tender. The beans or seeds inside the pods should be just beginning to bulge the sides a bit. A snap bean ready to harvest will break easily with a snap, as the name implies.

Harvesting should be done fairly frequently during warm weather to keep the plants yielding. When picking beans, be careful not to break up the plants. Use two hands, and pull the pods with one hand while holding the fruiting stems with the other hand.

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 should be allowed to dry completely before storing.

Beets

Beets can be harvested when they are 1-1 ½ inches in diameter, and at this stage both tops and roots can be cooked together. Beets should never be allowed to get larger than 3 inches, because beyond this size they become quite woody.

Broccoli

Broccoli should be harvested before the buds begin to separate or start to show a yellowish color. The center heads should be cut 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. Keeping the side shoots harvested will keep the plants producing until the weather becomes too warm and causes bolting.

Cabbage

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

Carrots

Carrots can be harvested when they reach finger size. Those that are not harvested will continue to grow.

Cauliflower

In order to get pure white heads on cauliflower, the outer leaves need to be tied together to cover the head as soon as it has reached a diameter of 2-3 inches. Examine the heads every few days to determine when to tie and when to harvest. Harvest the heads when they are still compact and fairly smooth. The bud segments should not be allowed to separate.

Chard

Harvesting can begin any time the plants develop 4 or 5 leaves. Full-grown leaves are cut 1-2 inches from the ground. Be careful not to injure the growing point in the center of the plant or the plant will not continue to produce new leaves. Very old leaves become tough and stringy. Always leave a few leaves on the plants so the plant can manufacture food to keep itself going and producing.

Collards

Collards can be harvested either by cutting the entire plant, or the bottom leaves can be taken off the plant periodically, leaving the central growing point to produce more leaves. Be careful not to damage the bud or production will be slowed down or halted completely.

Corn

Sweet corn should be harvested when the kernels are plump and in the milk stage, which is the stage when the silks are dry and brown. The cobs should feel well-filled out and tight at the tip. At this point, the kernels are about 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 cobs to see if they're ready. A little experience will enable the home gardener to feel the corn for tightness and readiness.

Corn should be cooked immediately, because the sugar in the kernels rapidly turns to starch, resulting in tougher kernels. Get corn cobs to the refrigerator as soon as possible if they can't be cooked right away.

Cucumbers

Cucumbers should be harvested when the fruits are young and green and the seeds still soft. A yellowish color on the skin indicates the seeds are mature and the fruit is beyond the eating stage. Picking should be done every other day.

Cucumbers to be used for sweet pickles should be 2-4 inches long; those to be used for dills are picked when 5 or 6 inches long. Slicers should be allowed to become 6-8 inches long. Any fruits which become over-mature should be removed from the vines and thrown away. Leaving them on the vines inhibits flowering and new fruit production.

Kohlrabi

Kohlrabi should be harvested when the enlarged stems have become 1½ to 3 inches in diameter. If they are allowed to become larger they get tough and stringy, and even woody.

Lettuce

The time to harvest lettuce depends a great deal on the type of lettuce. Head lettuce is ready when the head becomes firm. Bibb and leaf lettuce are harvested when the plants get large enough to use. If you have a limited number of leaf lettuce plants, just pull the older or outer leaves for use, leaving the plant to continue producing leaves. In 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 quickly refrigerated.

Onions to be harvested for storage should not be pulled until they are mature. After half the tops have fallen over, push over the rest to quicken maturity. In a few days they can be dug and must then be cured before storage. The tops and outer scales should first be allowed to dry. Drying can be accomplished in the garden on top of the soil or, if there is the possibility of rain, underneath a shelter in a dry, well-ventilated area. After the tops are fully dried, they can be cut off about 1 ½-2 inches above the bulb. The onions can then be placed in mesh bags or crates for storage in a dry area with air temperatures from 35°-50° F. Sprouting and rooting indicate the temperatures are 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, so it is well to store them in a moist medium, like sand, in a cool environment.

Peas

Peas should be picked when the pods appear well-filled but before they begin to harden or fade in color. The pods should be swelled to nearly round and picked every 3 to 5 days. Allowing mature pods to remain on the vines will reduce production. Peas mature over a 7-10 day period. Best quality is obtained if they are picked just before they will be eaten. Sugar conversion to starch begins rapidly after picking.

Peas with edible pods, such as snap and snow peas, are picked when 2-3 inches long. If they remain on the plants longer, the seeds harden and the pods will toughen.

Peppers

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

Potatoes

Harvest late varieties of potatoes when the tops have dried down but before any heavy freezes. Dig carefully to avoid injury and do not expose them to light for too long a period. They should be stored in a dark well-ventilated area where the temperature is around 45° F.

Early potatoes may be dug any time they have reached a usable size. These must be used soon after harvest to avoid shriveling and deterioration.

Pumpkins and Winter Squash

Harvest these vegetables after the vines dry up but before any heavy frost. The skin should be tough and have reached the correct color for the variety. With a sharp knife, cut the stem, leaving a two-inch stub on the fruit. Store in a warm dry area. Don't wash before storage.

Radishes

Radishes should begin to be harvested when about the size of a dime. Allowing them to become too large may cause them to become woody or hollow and pithy. Often the tops of the roots will push above the soil when they are ready for harvest.

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. Pick for only two weeks. In subsequent years the harvest can go on for about six weeks.

Separate the stalks from the crown by pulling, rather than cutting them, after they have reached at least 12 inches in length. Pick no more than one-half of the stalks of any one plant at a time. Allow the young stalks to continue to grow. After the stalks are harvested, trim off the leaves and discard them. They contain oxalic acid, which is toxic.

Spinach

Spinach is usually harvested from the time the plants have 5-6 leaves until just before seed stalks develop. Simply cut the entire plant off just above the soil level.

Summer Squash (Zucchini, Crookneck, Scallop, etc.)

These should be picked when young and tender. Yellow types should still be pale yellow when picked.

Scallop squash should be greenish. The skin should still be soft when punctured by a fingernail. If the rind is too hard to be marked by the fingernail test, the fruit is too old to be used. Size should be from 3-6 inches in length. Harvests should be carried out 2-3 times per week. Pick and discard any fruit that has begun to mature.

Tomatoes (They are actually a fruit.)

For best quality and flavor, tomatoes should be allowed to ripen on the plants. Green tomatoes can be picked and stored in a cool, moist, dark place. To ripen them, simply 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 by exposing them to warmer temperatures.

Turnips and Rutabagas

Both of these root crops can be harvested when they reach two inches in diameter. Turnips should not be allowed to get much larger, because they become hollow and pithy inside. Rutabagas, on the other hand, do not demonstrate this tendency and may be left in the ground for use during winter.

Fruits

Apples

Apples should be harvested when the fruits become fully colored for the variety. Reds especially should have a good red color. They can be picked at this stage for storage since they have matured enough. Leaving them on the tree for a few more days after they have reached this stage will give them more flavor and quality for eating out of hand. At this point some fruit will begin to drop from the tree.

On apples that are not solid red in color at maturity, the ground color is a good indicator of readiness. Ground color is the color of an apple's skin, disregarding any areas that have become red. When the ground color of red cultivars changes from leaf green to yellowish green or creamy, the apples are ready to harvest. In yellow cultivars, the ground color becomes golden. Tasting the fruit is often a good indicator of readiness. It should be firm, juicy and sweet, but with some tartness still evident. Immature apples tend to be astringent and puckery to the taste and in too immature a stage they will not ripen properly and will shrivel and lose flavor.

Summer varieties tend to ripen over a two- week period, and several pickings may be needed. On the other hand, the fruits on individual trees of late varieties tend to ripen all at once.

Pears

Pears should never be allowed to ripen on the tree. They need to be picked while still firm before any marked ripening occurs, or they will develop a gritty texture, and the inner flesh will become discolored and soft. If they're picked too green they will never really attain their optimum flavor and will tend to shrivel in storage.

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

Peaches

Peaches should be watched for color, not the amount of red color, but rather the ground color. (Ground color is the color of the skin, disregarding any areas that have become red.) This ground color should be yellow at the point they are picked. Pressing the flesh of a peach with the fingers in a cupped hand will indicate whether they are soft enough. The flesh should give somewhat under the pressure of the fingers. Also, the fruit should separate easily from the branch with a slight twisting motion.

If peaches are picked too early, the flesh will remain rubbery and never really soften. Generally, they will not become sweet. If they are allowed to become overripe, they will lose a considerable amount of the sweetness that peaches are noted for.

Plums

With both Japanese and European varieties of plums, a taste test is probably the best way to determine readiness for harvest. They should be just beginning to soften. The taste test should reveal sweet and juicy fruit with a softish texture.

Watching 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 plums should be determined by the taste test. Japanese plums will often look highly colored before they are ripe, so color should not be used to assess ripeness of these fruits. Use the taste test.

Apricots

Apricots must be completely yellow 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 fully ripe on the tree before picking. They must be juicy and sweet but still firm. The darker varieties should become very dark indeed before picking. Use the taste test.

Figs

Figs should be the correct color for the variety, somewhat softish, 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

Table grapes are always given the taste test before picking. Don't rely on color alone. When the color of the grapes looks good, taste a few from the ends of the bunches. If they're sweet, they're ready for harvest. The seeds should be brown.

Strawberries

During the strawberry ripening season it is a good idea to pick over the patch every day, or at most every other day. This is best done in the morning while the berries are still cool. They should be harvested when fully red. They are also sometimes picked when ¼ of the surface is slightly pink or white. A 25% white berry should ripen within a day's time. Picking berries in this partially ripe stage is often practiced if the strawberry season is a rainy one.

Raspberries

Raspberries of any color are ready when they separate easily from the stem. Don't allow them to become overripe or they will fall from the plants and be wasted.

Blackberries

Pick blackberries only when they are fully ripe and about to be used. They often look ripe before they are. They must be completely black and softish. Handle them carefully.

Blueberries

Blueberries should be tasted before picking. Most poor tasting blueberries are that way because they were picked before they were completely ready. Fully colored and plump blueberries should be harvested weekly for maximum flavor and quality.

Gooseberries or Currants

For table use, harvest these fruits when they are soft, well-colored and tasty. The taste test is the important one here. For making jellies and pies, hard, immature gooseberries are usually harvested.