



Harvesting Vegetables

Biggest Is Not Always the Best

Most crops can be harvested several times if only the part that is ready is harvested. The quality of vegetables does not improve after harvest so it is important to gather crops at proper maturity. At this point vegetables are at their peak for flavor and nutrition. This is not always when a vegetable is at its largest stage. Over ripe veggies left on the plant will tell the plant to stop producing. There is a lot of variation in the timing for harvesting between vegetables. Tomatoes may be left on the vine until fully ripened or taken off when partially ripened and placed on a windowsill to mature. Other crops such as winter squash and watermelon are not ready until after they are fully developed.

Handle Plants with Care when Harvesting

Avoid bruising or damaging vegetables as this causes decay. Stepping on vines or breaking stems creates openings through which diseases can enter the plant. If ripe vegetables are not easily removed from the plant, cut them off with a knife. Tramping through wet foliage helps to spread plant diseases. **Never harvest beans when wet!** It is best to harvest all vegetables when they are dry. Check the garden frequently for ripe produce during harvest time. Vegetables continue to grow and before long they are overgrown zucchini is a prime example.

Harvest Time

Beans, snap

Harvest when pods are almost full size but before the seeds inside begin to bulge. Tips should be pliable. Beans should be crisp and snap easily. Harvest often.

Beans, lima

Pick when pods and seeds reach full size and before pods turn yellow. End of pod should feel spongy. Pods and seeds should be fresh, juicy. Open a few pods to check. Use only seeds. Pods are tough and fibrous.

Beets

Beets can be eaten as greens when the leaves are 4 to 6 inches long. When grown for tops and beets, harvest when beets are 1 to 1-1/2 inches in diameter. To use only the beets, wait until they are 1-1/2 to 3 inches in diameter. They can remain in the ground long after the first frosts

Broccoli

Gather when buds are compact and before buds turn yellow or open into flowers. Cut off 6 to 7 inches below flower heads. Small, tender leaves also are nutritious

Brussels Sprouts

Pick when sprouts (buds) at the base of plant are firm. Don't strip leaves since they are needed for growth. Late summer/ early fall pinch out growing point at top of plant to get larger sprouts. You can remove some of the lowest ones and leave smaller ones to grow.

Cabbage

Harvest when heads are firm and before mature heads split. Splitting is caused by excessive water uptake. To avoid this, give the head a quarter turn to break several roots.

Carrots

Carrots are ready when 1 inch in diameter. They may be left in the ground for later harvest long after the first frosts

Cauliflower

It's ready when head is firm. It's over mature when soft or when leaves turn yellow. When heads are a diameter of 2 to 3 inches, take outer leaves and fold them up and over the head. Tie them with a string. This keeps head from turning yellow. In 1 to 3 weeks diameter of head should be 6 to 7 inches and ready to harvest. (some varieties have self wrapping leaves)

Corn

Kernels are plump, milky when mature. Silks are brown, dry. Corn is at prime eating quality for only 72 hours before becoming over mature. Harvest early in the morning or during cool weather. Un- even kernel development is due to poor wind pollination

Cucumbers

Pick when 6 to 9 inches long and still bright green and firm. Over mature fruits are dull in color or yellow and less crisp. For sweet pickles, fruits should be 1-1/2 to 2-1/2 inches long, and for dill pickles, 3 to 4 inches long. Do not raise vines when picking as this may damage the vines and reduce yields.

Eggplant

Harvest when 4 to 6 inches in diameter. Skin should be shiny, dark purple. Fruits are over mature when dull in color, soft and seedy.

Garlic

Harvest your garlic scapes when they have made at least 1 full turn, usually late June/ early July. Harvest the bulbs when at least half of the leaves have started to die off. Ususally late July early August. Make sure you dry them well before storing

Greens

Collards, kale, chard, mustard -- Cut outer leaves when 6 to 8 inches long.

Lettuce, Head

Pick when heads are moderately firm and about 6 inches in diameter, harvest before plant bolts and becomes bitters.

Lettuce , Leaf

Cut outer leaves as needed, when 4-8 inches long, depending on the variety. Lettuce becomes bitter when the plants bolt

Melon/Watermelon

Melons are ripe when the color changes to the mature coloring,when they come off the vine easily, they should smell like melon. Watermelon should have a mature and muted non glossy coloring, they spot on the bottom of the fruit should change from white to creamy.

Okra

Pods are ready when 3 to 4 inches long, about 4 to 6 days after the flower wilts. Pods stop producing if not picked, so gather them every 1 to 2 days.

Onions

Harvest when tops fall over and begin to die. Dig bulbs and dry for several days. Cut off tops and roots and store in a cool, dry place. Harvest green onions when they are 6 to 8 inches tall.

Peppers

Peppers are shiny green in their prime and about the size of a baseball. They still are good after turning red or yellow. Hot peppers are red or yellow when ripe.

Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes should be harvested before the first frost. Lift to avoid bruises and broken roots. Cure in a warm well-ventilated place for 2 to 3 weeks.

Radishes

Pull them up when they are about 1 inch in diameter. Radishes become hot and tough when left in the garden too long.

Rutabagas

Rutabagas are mature when 4 to 6 inches in diameter. They become woody and dry if soil is too dry.

Spinach

Leaves are ready when 4 to 6 inches long. Pull out larger, whole plants or harvest older leaves to allow new growth.

Summer Squash/ Zucchini

Zucchini, and summer squash -- Pick when seeds and fruits are small. Squash should be 6 to 8 inches long with skin you can puncture with a fingernail. Continue to harvest.

Winter Squash, Pumpkins

Butternut, buttercup, acorn, hubbard -- Harvest when fruits are full size. Rind should be firm, hard to mark or indent with a fingernail, not glossy and bottom of fruit is cream to orange color. Stem should be hard and dry. Leave squash on stems for better storing and pick before fall frost. Cure in well ventilated area 1 month before storing.

Tomatoes

For canning or juice pick fruits that are fully colored. If cracking at the top is a problem in hot weather, pick them when they are turning pink. These tomatoes will ripen in the shade indoors. Before the frost, pick green tomatoes and store in a dark place where they can ripen.

Turnips

Harvest when roots are 2 to 3 inches in diameter but before the frost. When grown for greens, pick leaves when 4 to 6 inches in length.