

Picking Vegetables in the Home Garden

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Asparagus

Asparagus is harvested during an 8-week period in the 3rd year after planting. It can be harvested for a shorter period during the second year of growth. Harvest for no more than a 2-week period during the first and second year. Cut spears at ground level when spears are 6 to 10 inches tall and when tips are tight. Asparagus needs to be cut every day during periods of warm weather. Refrigerate immediately after cutting to keep spears fresh, but do not store below 40°F to avoid cold damage. Placing spears upright in a pan or bowl with about 2" of water will keep them fresh and crisp.

Beet

Beets can be harvested for both the roots and the tops. The tops can be used in the same manner as spinach or Swiss chard. The leaves of young plants can also be used in salads. Beets should be harvested when the roots are one to three inches in diameter. The smaller the root, the more tender they will be when cooked. Beet roots larger than 4 inches in diameter may be hard and woody. Beets can be stored after the tops are removed about 1 inch above the root and placed in plastic bags to keep them from dehydrating and becoming soft. Refrigerate to extend freshness.

Broccoli

Broccoli should be harvested by cutting the head about 7 inches down the stem. Wait until the heads reach full size, about 4 to 6 inches in diameter. Weather conditions play a major role in harvesting. Hot temperatures make the heads become loose and cause florets to open into yellow flowers. Colder temperatures allow the heads to

grow tightly and prevent florets from flowering. Check heads every other day when daytime temperatures are near or above 70°F, and cut those that have reached full size. After the heads are cut, side shoots will form with smaller florets. These are tender and can be harvested and used the same way as the main head. After harvest, submerge heads in cold water, drain, and refrigerate in airtight containers or plastic bags to keep fresh.

Cabbage

Transplanted cabbage may be ready for harvest 65 to 85 days after planting. Seeded plants will take 90 to 120 days to mature. Harvest heads when they are hard and firm by cutting the head at the base of the plant. Heads do not need to be harvested immediately, and will become larger if left to grow. However, the chance of the heads splitting increases as they grow larger, especially during hot days. Split heads are still edible. Additionally, outside dark green leaves are also edible and are the most nutritious part of the plant. Refrigeration in a high humidity area will lengthen the freshness of cabbage heads.

Cantaloupe

Cantaloupes are ripe when the outside skin starts to turn from green to yellow. Additionally, a ripe melon easily slips off the vine where the melon is attached. Be careful not to step on vines when harvesting. The vines will most likely have other melons attached to them that need additional time to grow and ripen. Check the plants every 2 to 3 days for ripening melons. It is important to refrigerate melons if intended to be held for a few days before being eaten. Ripe cantaloupes do not store well for more than a week off the vine and should be eaten as soon as possible.



Carrot

Carrots can be harvested over a long period of time. All sizes are edible and carrots will remain fresh in the soil for many months, even after the tops have been killed by frost. To harvest carrots, use a pitchfork or shovel and dig alongside the row. Be careful not to stab or cut the roots of the carrot. Pull the tops up and shake the soil off the roots. To store carrots, wash off excess soil and place in airtight container or plastic bags. Carrots have a long storage life of up to 3 to 4 months, if stored properly. If your garden soil is well drained you can keep carrots in the ground and covered with leaves or straw until the soil begins to freeze usually in mid-December.

Cauliflower

Cauliflower needs to be harvested when heads are about 6 to 7 inches in diameter. Heads can grow larger, but larger heads may become loose and yellow. Cut the heads at the base of the florets inside the green wrapper leaves. Some wrapper leaves may be left on the outside of the head to protect the white florets. Refrigerate after harvest in an airtight container or bag to reduce moisture loss and retain firmness.

Cucumber

Cucumbers can be harvested for several days after the first fruit mature, generally for a 3-week period. Harvest cucumbers that are 4 to 6 inches long and dark green in color. Larger cucumbers tend to be seedy and can be bitter. Harvest fruit every 2 to 3 days for optimum maturity. Make sure not to damage the vines when harvesting. Hold the vine with one hand while pulling the fruit off with the other, or use pruning shears. Wash cucumbers and refrigerate (at about 50° to 55°F) to keep fresh.

Eggplant

Eggplants come in many shapes, sizes and colors. For the common large eggplant, harvest when the fruit are about 6 to 10 inches long and dark black in color. If the fruit becomes too large, they tend to be seedy and bitter. Be careful of the thorns on the stems. Use gloves and a pair of pruning shears to cut the eggplants from the stems. Eggplants can be washed, but not refrigerated. Temperatures below 50°F will cause decay and shriveling of the fruit.

Green Bean

Green beans or snap beans should be harvested before the internal seeds become too large. Beans can be harvested 3 to 4 times over a 2 to 3 week period. Harvest when the beans are 3 to 6 inches long and slender. Be careful not to break the branches when pulling beans off the plant. Branches will have new flowers that will produce more beans. Do not wash beans until ready to cook. Water can brown the beans and cause decay. Refrigerate beans after harvest in an airtight container or plastic bag to avoid moisture loss.

Garden Pea

Garden peas should be harvested when the pods are fully filled. Pods may appear swollen, but the peas inside may not be fully sized. Squeeze the pod to see if it is filled or soft. Wait for the pods to be filled. Two or three picks may be necessary to remove the pods because all pods may not mature at the same time. Peas can be stored in the pod or shelled. Refrigerate peas in an airtight container or plastic bag to avoid moisture loss.

Kale and Collard Greens

These greens can be harvested about 40 days after planting. Instructions on the seed packet will be more specific about days from planting to harvest. Harvest by cutting at the base of the plant about ½ inch above the soil line. Greens can be bunched together with a rubber band or string. To keep greens fresh rinse them in cold water and keep refrigerated. Greens can be stored wet.

Lettuce

Lettuce can be harvested at many different stages. Make sure to harvest loose-leaf types before they begin to form a flower shoot. Head or iceberg lettuce should be harvested when the heads become firm. Cut the head at the soil level and remove any brown or yellowed leaves. Cool leaf type lettuces by submerging in cold water and refrigerating. Head lettuce should not be wet before refrigerating to prevent a rust appearance that may form inside the head.

Onion

Onions are ready to harvest after the top leaves lay down and become brown. Although onions can be harvested at

any time for use and the green portion can also be used. After harvest of mature bulbs, place them on a screen in the sun to dry. Do not pile the onions on top of each other. Spread them out so that the air will circulate to help dry the bulbs. Do not refrigerate dry bulbs. Humidity in refrigeration will cause decay and molding. Keep them in a cool, dry place, but keep them from freezing.

Pepper

Peppers should be harvested when firm and dark green. Peppers can also be left on the plant to mature to a red color. Some varieties will turn red, orange, purple, or yellow when mature. Harvesting green peppers from the plant will increase yields from the plant. Harvest peppers when plants are dry to decrease the possibility of plant diseases or fruit rots. Peppers can be washed and refrigerated after harvest.

Potato

Potatoes should be harvested when the vines begin to yellow and die back. Use a shovel or pitchfork to lift the potatoes out of the soil. Be careful not to cut or stab the tubers. Begin digging deeply, about 8 to 12 inches away from the stem and work inward towards the row. Wash the excess soil off the tubers and dry them by keeping them in a warm area until the skin dries brown. Do not keep tubers in sunlight or exposed to light in general. Tubers will turn green and become inedible. Newly dug potatoes can be eaten immediately. To store tubers place them in a dark, warm (55° to 65°F), moist area to heal over any scars and to toughen the skin for curing. After curing store in a dark, cool moist area like a root cellar. Do not refrigerate potatoes.

Radish

Radishes can be harvested as soon as they reach a desired size. Generally, roots that are the size of a quarter in diameter are a good size. Harvest by pulling up on the stem. Roots come up easily and tops can be cut off just above the root. Wash excess soil off of the roots and place in a plastic bag to refrigerate.

Spinach

Spinach can be harvested at any stage, depending on desired leaf-size and tenderness. Many spinach varieties

are ready for harvest 40 to 50 days after seeding. Smaller plants will be very tender. Make sure to harvest before the plant starts to bolt or make a flower shoot. Spinach can be harvested two or three times if only the leaves are cut. New leaves will form from the center of the plant. Cut the outside leaves about half way down the stem. If the entire plant is cut at the soil level, new leaves will not form. Spinach should be cut when dry and immediately refrigerated in an airtight container or plastic bag to preserve freshness. Do not store spinach wet or it will quickly deteriorate.

Sweet Potato

Sweet Potatoes are roots and not tubers like white potatoes. Do not wait for vines to die before harvesting. Harvest sweet potato roots at least one week before a predicted frost. Do not let them be exposed to cold (below 55°F) outdoor conditions or frost. Dig roots with a shovel or pitchfork. Be sure not to cut or stab the roots. Gently remove soil until you see a root exposed. Sweet potatoes are very tender when dug and most are cured before storage. Cure the roots by keeping them in a hot (85° to 90°F) moist area for a week. After curing, store them in a warm (55° to 60°F) dry place.

Squash (Zucchini and Yellow Summer)

Squash can be harvested at different sizes. Both zucchini and yellow summer squash should be harvested when 6 to 10 inches long. Larger squash can be harvested and are edible, but will not be as tender. Also, large squash may have many hard seeds inside that may not be palatable. Zucchini squash need to be cut from the plant with a knife. (Cut the squash at the small stem that attaches the squash to the plant.) Wearing gloves and long sleeved shirts is a good idea when harvesting zucchini, because they have little spines on the branches. Take care not to cut the stems or small fruit forming near the fruit you are harvesting. Unlike zucchini, yellow squash can be hand harvested without a knife. Grab the fruit and then twist and pull away from the plant. The fruit of zucchini and yellow summer squash usually have the remains of the flower on the end of the fruit. Simply remove the dried flower by pulling it off. Both of these types of fruit are tender and easily scratched or bruised, so take care when handling them and placing them into harvesting containers. If the fruit are dirty, they can be washed. Refrigerate soon after harvest if not using them right away.

Sweet Corn

Sweet corn ears mature about 3 to 4 weeks after the first silk appears on the small ear of the plant. When the silk on the top of the ear are brown and have died back, the ear is generally ready for harvest. Squeezing the ear by wrapping a hand around the ear to feel for kernels is also a good way to determine if the ear is mature. Peeling back the leaves of the ear is another way, but the ear may be damaged if not mature. Do not husk the corn until it is ready to be cooked. Husks prevent kernels from being damaged and reduce moisture loss. Ears can be cooled down with cold water and refrigerated to maintain freshness. Corn is best eaten or frozen the day of harvest.

Tomato

Tomatoes can be harvested at the green mature or ripe stage. The green mature stage is when the seeds inside are fully formed, but the flesh remains green. When a pink color shows up at the flower end of the tomato, ripening has begun. Tomatoes should be harvested at the pink stage: (when color first shows) if they are to be kept for a long period or need to be shipped. To harvest grasp the tomato fruit as close to the branch as possible and twist away from the plant. Remove the attached stem from the fruit after picked to prevent stem punctures when tomatoes are in the basket. Stems can cause wounds that quickly rot the fruit. If tomatoes are to be used shortly after harvest, they can be vine ripened to a full red color. Harvesting tomatoes at the vine ripe stage gives excellent flavor, but will not be as suitable for shipping. Tomatoes should not be wet and never refrigerated. Make sure to store at temperatures above 50°F.

Watermelon

Watermelons do not slip off the vine like cantaloupes when ripe. Therefore, it is necessary to look for other indicators. Roll the melon over to look at the “ground spot” where the melon was laying and if it is a pale yellow color, the melon should be ripe. Additionally, look at the tendrils (short, curly, stem-like vine) next to the melon. The tendrils are close to the area where a leaf is attached to the main vine. When the first tendril next to the fruit looks dead and dried up, the melon closest to that tendril should be ripe. Watermelons will store longer than other melons and should be refrigerated, especially after cut.

Winter Squash (Butternut, Acorn, Spaghetti)

Winter squashes should be harvested after their skins have hardened. They will store well for long periods of time after harvest, generally 3 to 4 months. Make sure to harvest fruit before the first frost. Frost will damage the skin and cause rots. To harvest fruit use a pair of pruning shears to cut the stem about ½ inch above the fruit. Do not break the stem off of the fruit. Breaking the stem off will cause a wounded area for fruit rots to spoil the squash. Butternut squash are ripe when the outside skin turns a deep flesh color. Acorn squash are mature when the underside of the fruit turns an orange-yellow color where it had laid on the ground. Spaghetti squash is ripe when the skin turns a golden yellow color and hardens. If squash are soiled they can be washed. Store fruit in a warm (at least 55°F) dry and dark area for extended shelf life.