



TIPS ON HARVESTING VEGGIES

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From *The Curious Gardener*, Fall 2010

The warm weather continues and the garden is producing. When do you harvest and what do you do with the bounty? Knowing when to harvest your vegetables is as important as knowing how to grow them. Each vegetable has a window of opportunity for harvest. Some vegetables have a long harvest window but others can go from tender to tough and bitter overnight. We all know what happens to zucchini if we are not vigilant in our harvesting. The biggest is not necessarily the best.

Counting days to maturity cannot always be relied upon as growth depends on many factors, including temperature and soil fertility, which will vary from year to year. The quality of vegetables does not improve after harvest so learning when to harvest will ensure picking vegetables at proper maturity. The best way to determine when a vegetable is ready to harvest is from the characteristics of the plant itself. These signs can often be subtle and it takes practice to familiarize yourself with them. There are lots of good resources available which will give you specific information for each vegetable you are growing. Refer to these, as you will have better success with increased knowledge about the particular characteristics of a plant.

First, try to avoid damaging the plants when harvesting. Use clean, sharp knives or pruners to remove summer squash, cucumbers and other large vegetables. This decreases the chance of disease entering the cut. Also, harvest vegetables when the plants and veggies are dry. Avoid bruising or damaging the vegetables.

Some vegetables need to be harvested before any frost occurs (most hot season crops such as tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, etc), while others need freezing temperatures to complete their ripening (brussel sprouts and parsnips).

Many root crops can be left in the ground through the winter covered with some mulch of hay or leaves. (beets, carrots, rutabagas and turnips)

Some vegetables need to be cured after harvest. This involves exposing the produce to warm, dry air (but not direct sun) so that the outer skin hardens and protects the core from rotting. (onions, potatoes and sweet potatoes).

Sometimes it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time to harvest; melons fall into this category. The general rule is to smell the fruit, to look for the nearest tendril to the melon, and to observe the color change on the part of the melon that it resting on the ground. When it smells sweet, when the tendril is brown and dry and when the part of the fruit resting on the ground goes from white to creamy, it is ready. A general rule of thumb is to harvest early in the morning. This is particularly important when harvesting leafy greens such as lettuce, spinach, kale, or swiss chard. This will protect the greens from undo exposure to sun and wilting.

Many vegetables should be stored only at room temperature. This allows for further ripening and flavor. Make sure the vegetables are not in direct sun as they ripen on the kitchen counter. Placing cucumbers or summer squash in a vented plastic bag helps reduce moisture loss. Use your fresh vegetables as soon as possible for the best nutrition and optimum quality. To maintain food safety, wash your produce under running water rather than filling the sink with water and washing a batch at a time. Before and during harvest remember to use clean tools, gloves, and work surfaces. Learn about your vegetables and get the best of the best from your hard labors. It is worth it!

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References

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“Storing Fresh Fruits and Vegetables for Better Taste.” Postharvest Technology Research and Information Center, Department of Pomology, UC Davis.

“Guidelines for Harvesting Vegetables,” Cornell Cooperative Extension, Chemung County

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