

Harvest Hints for the Vegetable Garden

Anticipating the harvest of the first cucumber, squash or tomato is one of the joys of home gardening. But, many home gardeners may be disappointed over the hours invested in gardening if they harvest immature or over mature vegetables.

- **Peas** – they reach their peak slightly before the seeds reach their fullest size. Harvest when the pods are well filled and plump, but before they reach the stage where they appear to burst. At this point the seeds are very high in sugar content. The longer they remain on the vine, the poorer the quality. Also, at the edible stage, the higher the temperature, the quicker they pass peak quality.
- **Snap beans** – start harvesting snap beans when the pods reach full length, but are still young and tender. Quality decreases as the seeds enlarge. A snap bean ready to harvest should break easily with a snap. Harvest frequently during warm weather.
- **Summer squash** – they should be harvested and used while young and tender. Fruit 6 to 8 inches long and 1 ½ to 2 inches in diameter are ideal. If the rind of the fruit can't be penetrated with slight pressure of the thumbnail, it is too old for the table. The very large fruit, especially zucchini, can be used for "stuffing; however, the quality of the vegetable per se isn't very high. Remove old fruit from the plant immediately to permit new flowers and fruit to develop.
- **Cucumbers** – harvest while fruit are young and the seeds are soft. A yellowish color indicates that the seeds are mature and the fruit beyond the edible stage. Frequently, "bitterness" is directly related to over maturity. Harvest every other day; over mature and/or poorly-shaped fruit should be removed from the vine.
- **Tomatoes** – during warm weather, tomato fruit should be harvested twice a week. Pick firm red fruit. Mature tomato fruit are prone to cracking, especially after a rain.
- **Sweet corn** – corn should be harvested when the kernels are in the "milk" stage. At this stage of maturity, the "milk" is watery and will squirt out freely when pressed by the thumbnail. Carefully examine a few test ears for maturity by opening a small window on the side of the ear. Do not "explore" for maturity by pulling the husks completely away from one side of the ear. When harvested later these ears will be lower in quality. Like several other crops, sweet corn passes the prime eating stage quickly, especially in hot weather.
- **Peppers** – they are usually harvested after reaching full size. Conventionally, the green mature fruit are harvested, however the fruit may be allowed to mature (turn red) before being harvested.
- **Eggplant** – should be harvested when they reach a uniformly deep purple color and are properly sized for the variety. Fruit in which the seeds have turned brown are of poor quality and past the edible stage.
- **Muskmelon** – melons pass prime eating quality rapidly. During warm weather a daily harvest is necessary. As a muskmelon ripens the color between the netting changes from light green to tan or yellow. A mature melon will easily come off the vine with a gentle pull. This is known as the "slip" stage. Chill in the refrigerator before serving. If it

necessary to harvest slightly immature melons they can be ripened by holding at room temperature.

- **Watermelon** – determining the maturity of a watermelon is somewhat difficult. Before looking for any signs of maturity, wait until the fruit reaches the size described in the seed catalog for that variety. When the fruit attain full size, check the color of the rind where it touches the ground. A ripe melon will have a cream or yellow color. Some experts can tell if a melon is ripe by the sound when thumped with the knuckles. A metallic ring indicates immaturity and a dull or muffled sound indicated ripeness. Immature watermelons will not continue to ripen after harvest.
- **Cauliflower** – The curd or edible part of the plant should be protected from sunlight (blanched) to develop a good white color, which is preferred. However, off-colored heads are edible. While the curd is small, it is protected by the small leaves, but as the curd develops the leaves of the plant should be tied together above the curd. The curd should be ready for harvest two to three weeks after tying. Harvest when they are still compact and fairly smooth.
- **Broccoli** – Broccoli should be harvested when the individual flower buds are the size of a match head, but before they show yellow. After the central heads are harvested, small heads will develop in the lateral branches. These lateral heads are ideal for freezing.
- **Onions** – When onions are mature, the tops will fall over. After pulling the bulbs from the soil, leave them in the sun for 7 to 10 days for further drying and curing. Remove the tope before storing.
- **Winter squash and pumpkin** – Squash and pumpkins can be harvested after they have developed the appropriate color for the variety and a hard rind. If the rind of the fruit cannot be penetrated by the thumbnail, the fruit is mature. The fruit should be harvested before heavy frosts since they are injured by cold temperatures. Cut the stem from the vine. Fruit without a stem will not store well.
- **Potatoes** – Potatoes can be harvested any time for immediate consumption once the tubers are of sufficient size. However, yield is reduced and storage quality is lowered by harvesting tubers before the tops dry down. Tubers harvested early (immature tubers) have thin skins which allow fairly rapid water loss causing the tubers to shrivel and become soft shortly after storage. Storage potatoes should be harvested one or two weeks after the vines dry down but before there is danger of freezing. After harvest, the tubers should be stored in the dark in moist air at approximately 60 F for several weeks. Temperatures should be lowered to 38 – 40 F for long term storage. Storing potatoes at this temperature keeps them from sprouting and maintains them in firm physical condition. Warmer temperatures allow sprouting to take place. Colder temperatures cause a sweet taste and can result in discoloration in the inside of the tubers. Whatever the storage temperature, keep the potatoes in complete darkness. Exposure to light causes the tubers to turn green and to develop undesirable levels of bitter compounds.
- **Asparagus** – Asparagus shoots grow very rapidly and require frequent cutting, especially if the temperature is high. Early in the season the shoots may require cutting only every third day. As the growth becomes more active, spears might have to be cut twice a day. Green asparagus spears should be cut 9 to 10 inches long, and at least half of the length should be above ground. The underground part is fibrous and

unpalatable. When cutting take care to avoid injury to the young spears developing underground. Knife injury to buds and immature shoots causes them to develop into crooked spears.

- **Brussels sprouts** – Brussels sprouts can be harvested over a considerable period if the lower sprouts are picked when they become firm. The leaf below each sprout is usually broken off so that the sprout can be easily picked. The plant continues to produce more leaves and sprouts at the top. At the onset of severe freezing weather, the plants with good sprouts can be cut and stored in a cool cellar for use during the winter.
- **Lima beans** – harvesting of green limas should begin when the seeds reach full size and are light green in color but before the pod shows any yellowing. The seeds turn white as they mature. Over mature seeds are high in carbohydrates and low in sugar, but if allowed to remain on the bush until dry they make suitable dry beans.
- **Radishes** – Radishes develop poor shape and go to seed quickly in hot weather; therefore, they should be harvested as soon as roots are of edible size.
- **Beets** – Beets can be harvested when they are 1 to 1 ½ inches in diameter and this is the most desirable stage if the tops are used as greens. Roots can be of good quality up to 2 ½ to 3 inches.
- **Carrots** – Carrots are edible as soon as they reach usable size. Normally harvesting begins when the roots are ½ to ¾ inch in diameter at the upper end.
- **Spinach** – Spinach may be harvested from the time the plants have 6 – 8 leaves until the seed stem develops. The entire plant is cut off at the soil level.
- **Swiss chard** – Harvesting can begin anytime after the plants develop 4 or 5 leaves. The full grown leaves are cut 1 – 2 inches from the ground. While harvesting, care should be exercised to avoid injuring the growing point in the center so new leaves will continue to form and develop. Old leaves are tough and should be cut and discarded.
- **Rhubarb** – In harvesting, the stalks are pulled, not cut. The leaf blades are removed and only the fleshy stem or petiole is used. Always leave a few stalks on the plant unless the bed is to be discontinued. After 10 – 15 years, the plants become crowded and the leaf petioles small.
- **Cabbage** – Cabbage can be harvested as soon as it attains a head of sufficient size and firmness. Heads split as they become over mature. Heads harvested before splitting can be stored for long periods if a temperature between 45 and 32 F is maintained. Heads which are to be stored should be solid, free from disease and harvesting injury.
- **Kohlrabi** – Kohlrabi is grown for the turnip-like enlargement of the stem. It is tasty if picked while it is tender and cooked as is cauliflower or sliced and served raw. With a good supply of moisture it is easily grown in either hot or cold weather. However, kohlrabi must be grown rapidly and harvested when 1 ½ - 3 inches in diameter, or it will become tough and stringy.

Source: Cornell Cooperative Extension