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When Should I Harvest My Garden Vegetables?

You put your time and energy into growing tomatoes, greens, zucchini, and other vegetables from seed. So of course you want to harvest them at their absolute best. But it's not always easy to know when that is.

We can help! Home Garden Seed Association members make it their business to taste and describe varieties they sell, comparing the flavors and textures. Picking at peak flavor is essential! The cumulative wisdom of HGSA seed experts might just increase your appreciation for the food you grow.

So how *do* you know if your vegetables are ready to harvest?



Tip: Tomatoes lose flavor when refrigerated. Fresh tomatoes will keep for a week or so on the countertop.

Tomatoes, in most cases, should be slightly soft when squeezed, and fully colored. But there are exceptions. Large heirlooms can be prone to cracking, and are best picked before they have completely turned color. They'll continue to ripen after harvest. Similarly, cherry tomatoes crack if left on the vine too long, so pick them just before they are perfectly ripe.



Tip: Both chard and kale are biennial plants, and will flower and produce seed in their second growing season.

Chard and **Kale** are best when the leaves are young and tender, though the plants themselves need not be young. Harvest baby leaves for salads or, as plants become sturdy, cut the outer leaves regularly, making sure not to damage the growing tip. Leaves can be continually harvested until frost, or well into the winter in mild areas.



Green Beans are tender and tasty when they are long, slender, and crisp, before the seeds form lumps in the pods. If you leave the beans on the plant for too long they will become tough and stringy, so pick often.

Tip: Harvest beans every other day to keep your plants productive.



Corn is ready for picking when the silks turn brown (but have not dried out yet), and the husks are still green. Feel the end of the ear. If it feels rounded or blunt rather than pointed, it is completely filled out, and ready for harvest.

Tip: If you're not sure your corn is ready, prick a kernel with your fingernail. Juice should be milky-white.



Eggplants have a nice, reflective sheen when they are at their peak of readiness. Size and color are not necessarily indications of maturity, as varieties come in a full range of both. As fruits get older the skins get tough and dull and the flesh bitter, so harvest them as soon as they achieve their smooth, glossy finish.

Tip: Cut rather than pull the fruits to avoid damaging the plants.



Melons should be harvested fully ripe. Look at the skin color: the flesh between a cantaloupe's netting will turn from green to tan, and the netting will become well defined. Honeydews develop a yellow blush on their ivory rinds. Watermelons turn dull when ripe, and the tendril closest to the fruit shrivels.

Tip: Smell the blossom end of the fruit. Cantaloupes will have a sweet smell when ripe.



Summer Squash is better when it is small, so there's nothing to be gained by growing behemoths. Zucchini and yellow crookneck squash are at their most tender when no bigger than 4 to 6 inches; round zucchini, 3 to 4 inches. Patty pan squash is best at 3 inches or smaller.

Tip: Summer squash is often harvested at the baby stage, with the flower still attached.



Beets will tell you when they are ready to be harvested; their shoulders will protrude from the ground. Pull the roots small (1½ inch) or medium-sized (about 3 inches), depending on your preference. Don't leave them in the ground too long in hot weather, or the texture will suffer.

Tip: Beet greens can be harvested sparingly while roots are in the ground.



Cucumbers should be harvested green and firm. Even lemon cucumbers should be picked when light green with just a blush of yellow. Bigger is not better; cucumbers develop a bitter taste as the seeds mature. Harvesting size depends on the variety. Slicing cucumbers are generally smooth and glossy when they're ready, picklers may have prickles.

Tip: When you snip, leave a bit of stem attached so your cukes will be less prone to rotting in storage.



Lettuce can be planted thickly in a wide row and cut with scissors repeatedly when the tender young greens reach 4 inches tall. Or it can be grown to head-size. Either way, always harvest lettuce before plants start to elongate and "bolt" (send up a flower stem). This causes the flavor to become bitter.

Tip: Morning is the best time to harvest lettuce, as the leaves will be crisp.



Peppers are most flavorful when they turn red, orange, yellow, or whatever their mature color is, although many people enjoy them green. Clip (don't pull) fruits from the plants when they are firm and full-sized. If you choose to let them ripen fully, check them daily, as peppers deteriorate very quickly after reaching maturity.

Tip: To increase total yield, pick peppers green early in the season; the plant will continue to set fruit.



Winter Squash is sweetest when fully mature. When it is ripe, the rind becomes hard and is no longer shiny. Test it with your fingernail—if it can be scratched but not punctured, it is mature. Cut the squash with pruners, leaving a short handle, and let it cure in a warm space for 10 days before storing in a cool, dry place.

Tip: Some types of winter squash, such as Butternut, can be stored for 6 months or longer.