

Guidelines for Harvesting Vegetables

From Cornell Cooperative Extension, Chemung County

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Knowing when to harvest your vegetables is as important as knowing how to grow them. Each vegetable has a window of opportunity for harvest. While some vegetables are quite forgiving in having a long harvest window, others can go from tender and tasty to tough and bitter overnight.

Counting days to maturity cannot always be relied upon as growth depends on many factors, including precipitation, temperature, and soil fertility, and so can vary from year to year. 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.

It should also be noted that harvest for many vegetables is determined by the freezing temperatures of autumn. Some vegetables need to be harvested before any frost occurs, while others need freezing temperatures to complete their ripening. The following table gives a brief description of some of the physiologic and environmental clues that help us know when to harvest our vegetables.

Note:

- A frost can occur anywhere from 36 F to 32 F. A light freeze refers to temperatures between 28 F and 31 F, a moderate freeze between 24 F and 28 F, and severe freeze below 24 F.
- Many root crops can be left in the ground through the winter if “mulched heavily.” This means covering your root crops before the ground freezes with 1 to 2 feet of a mulch such as hay, leaves, or straw.
- Some vegetables need to be cured after harvest. This involves exposing the produce to warm, dry air so that the outer skin hardens and protects the succulent core from rotting.

Asparagus: Harvest by snapping 6”-10” spears off at ground level. Limit harvest period to 6-8 weeks or until stems are pencil thin.

Beans, Lima: Harvest when pods are filled but before yellowing. For tender lima beans, harvest when slightly immature; for meaty beans, wait until fully mature.

Beans, Snap: Bean pods will be the most tender when the small seed inside is one-fourth normal size. From this stage on, the pods become more fibrous and the beans more starchy.

Beets: Begin Harvest when beet is 1” in diameter. Beet tops at this time make excellent tender greens. Begin main harvest when beets are 2”-3”. Harvest spring planted beets before hot weather (July). Harvest fall beets before the first moderate freeze or mulch heavily for winter harvest.

Helping You Put Knowledge to Work

Broccoli: Harvest terminal head while florets are still tight and of dark green color, before flowers start to open. Smaller sized heads will develop off side shoots.

Brussels Sprouts: Remove lowest leaves from stalk to improve sprout size. Harvest sprouts (small heads) when they are firm in size starting from the bottom. Frost improves flavor, but harvest before first severe freeze.

Cabbage: Harvest when heads are solid. If heads become over mature they may split. To delay harvest and prevent splitting, pull upward on head until upper roots snap.

Cabbage, Chinese: Grow only in fall. Harvest heads after the first moderate frost.

Cantaloupe: There are three ways to tell when to harvest muskmelon; when stem slips easily from vine, surface netting turns beige, and blossom end is soft and smells sweet.

Carrots: Harvest at 1"-2" thickness. Harvest spring carrots before hot weather (July). Fall planted carrots should be harvested before ground freezes, or mulch heavily for winter harvest.

Cauliflower: Tie outer leaves above the head when curds are about 1"-2" in diameter. Heads will be ready for harvest in 1-2 weeks. Pick before head becomes yellow, ricey or blemished.

Chard (Swiss): A green that may be harvested continuously by breaking off outer leaves. Spring planting will provide greens from early summer to first moderate freeze.

Corn, Sweet: Wait to harvest sweet corn until tip feels full through husk. Silks will be dry and kernels filled out. To check for maturity, open top of ear and press a kernel with thumbnail. If it exudes a milky sap, it is ready for harvest. Use as soon as possible after harvest.

Cucumber: Cucumbers are best when slightly immature, just as the spines soften and before the seeds become half-size. This will vary with variety. Most varieties will be 1 ½"-2 ½" in diameter, 5"-8" long. Pickling cucumbers will be blocky and not as long.

Eggplant: Harvest when fruits are nearly full-grown but color is still bright and shiny. Overripe when color dulls and seeds turn brown.

Horseradish: Harvest after several severe freezes or mulch heavily for winter harvest.

Kale: Harvest leaves and leaf stems when they reach suitable size. Frost improves flavor.

Kohlrabi: Harvest when the swollen stems are 2"-3" in diameter. Stems become woody if left too long before harvest or if grown under poor conditions.

Lettuce, Head: Harvest entire plant when head feels firm but before center bolts.

Lettuce, Leaf: Harvest outer leaves as they attain suitable size. Timely picking increases length of harvest.

Okra: Okra pods are ready to harvest when they are 2"-3" long and snap easily. Over-mature pods become tough and woody.

Onions, Green: Harvest green onions when they attain sufficient size.

Onions, Dry: Harvest at ¼"-1" for fresh table use, 1"-1 ½" for boiling and pickling, and when tops have fallen over & necks are shriveled for storage and general cooking. Fingers will not dent mature bulbs. Cure onions by placing in a single layer or mesh bag in a dry, well-ventilated area out of direct sunlight for 3-4 weeks. Remove tops when fully dry.

Parsnips: Harvest in late fall after several moderate freezes or mulch heavily for winter harvest. Exposure to cold improves flavor.

Peas, Garden: Harvest when pods are light green and filled out but before yellowing. Flat, dark green pods are immature.

Peas, Snow: As opposed to garden peas, snow peas should be harvested when they attain full size and seeds begin to show. Do not allow pod to fill out.

Peppers, Hot: Harvest as needed. Young, green peppers are hotter than mature, colored ones. For long-term storage, pull plants late in season and hang to dry in a warm, well-ventilated place.

Peppers, Sweet: Harvest when fruits are firm and full size. If red fruits are desired, leave on plant until red color develops.

Potato: Harvest new potatoes 2 weeks after blooming. Harvest main crop after tops have died down and when ground is dry. Dig carefully to avoid bruising and allow to surface dry. Cure for 10-14 days in a dark, well-ventilated location at 45 F to 60 F.

Pumpkins: See Squash, Winter

Radish: Harvest when ½"-1" in diameter. Harvest spring radishes before hot weather (July). Winter radishes should be harvested before ground freezes, or mulch heavily for winter harvest.

Rhubarb: Leaf stalks are harvested when ½"-1" in diameter. **Do not use leaves!**

Spinach: Harvest when leaves attain suitable size. Break off outer leaves as plant grows or harvest entire plant at once. Harvest fall spinach sparingly to allow for spring regrowth.

Squash, Summer: Best when harvested young and tender. Skin should be easily penetrated with the thumbnail.

Squash, Winter: Maturity can be roughly determined by pressure from the thumbnail on the fruit skin. Mature fruit will be hard and impervious to scratching. Harvest squash before the first hard frost with a sharp knife, leaving at least 1" of stem attached. Fruit picked without the stem will soon decay around the stem scar. Cure in a dry, well-ventilated area for 10 days at 75 F to 85 F.

Sweet Potato: Harvest in fall before frosts and freezing temperatures. Handle carefully in digging as bruised tubers will rot. Cure for 1 week at 80 F to 85 F.

Tomato: Harvest when fruits are uniformly red, but before end softens. Ripe fruit sinks in water. Vine-ripened tomatoes are sweetest, but tomatoes will ripen off the vine if picked green. Green tomatoes, harvested before frost, should be wrapped in newspaper and kept at 55 F to 70 F. Tomatoes stored in this manner should last 3-5 weeks. Be sure to inspect each week for ripeness.

Turnip: Turnips can be harvested from the time they are 1” in diameter. They are best as a fall crop and can withstand several light freezes. Frost improves flavor. Stems become woody if left too long before harvest or if grown under poor conditions

Watermelon: Best indicator for ripe fruit is by the sound. Thumping a mature melon gives a dull hollow thud while an immature melon gives a ringing metallic sound. Also, the underside of a ripe melon turns from white to yellow and the tendril at the juncture of the fruit stem and the vine usually dies when the fruit is mature.

Vegetable Harvest Calendar

	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DE C
ASPARAGUS		■	■						
BEANS				■	■	■			
BEETS			■	■	■	■	■		
BROCCOLI			■	■	■	■	■		
CABBAGE			■	■	■	■	■	■	
CANTALOUPE				■	■	■			
CARROTS				■	■	■	■	■	
CAULIFLOWER			■	■		■	■		
CELERY				■	■	■	■		
CORN				■	■	■			
CUCUMBERS				■	■	■			
EGGPLANT				■	■	■			
KALE			■	■	■	■	■	■	
LETTUCE			■	■	■	■	■		
ONIONS				■	■	■	■		
PEAS			■	■	■				
PEPPERS				■	■	■			
POTATOES				■	■	■	■		
PUMPKINS						■	■		
RADISHES		■	■	■	■	■	■		
RHUBARB		■	■						
SPINACH		■	■			■	■		
SQUASH, Summer			■	■	■	■			
SQUASH, Winter						■	■		
TOMATOES				■	■	■			
TURNIPS			■	■	■	■	■	■	
WATERMELON					■	■			

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