

When is the Right Time to Pick Vegetables?

You have worked hard preparing your garden, planting your seedlings and seeds, pulled weeds, watered, fertilized and then waited. When can you finally begin to enjoy the bounty of the garden? Each crop has its own peak of ripeness best time to be picked. Here are some general guidelines and specifics on things I grow in my garden.

In general it is best to harvest first thing in the morning. One big exception might be corn on the cob. Corn sugar turns to starch quickly after picking. In my family we put the water on to boil and then go out to pick the corn.

Some vegetables are best left on the plant until fully ripe. Others should be picked before they reach full maturity.

Black-eyed Peas – Pick slightly before maturity. I will generally try to bend the pod a bit. When the pods become more flexible they are easy to shell and taste delicious. Pick often to encourage continued production. Hold the vine and pull the peas off so as not to break the vine.

Cantaloupe – Look for the flesh between the netting to turn from green to tan. If the stem separates easily from the melon it is ripe.

Corn – Corn should be picked just before use or at a cooler time of day. It is more tender and sweet if picked before completely mature. Look for silks that have turned dark brown and the ears feel firm. To test for ripeness make a small slit in the ear and use your fingernail to pierce a kernel. If the liquid is clear wait a few more days. If it is milky pick and eat. Pasty liquid means the corn is past its prime but still usable for canning.

Cucumbers – Avoid picking cucumbers when the vines are wet as there are many diseases that can be spread at that time. Cucumbers that have turned yellow are past their prime. However they should be picked and disposed of so that the vine does not cease production. Use a sharp knife or pruning shears to remove the cucumbers from the vine. Check the vines every day as cucumbers grow rapidly.

Green Beans – Plan to harvest every two to three days as they mature rapidly. Look for beans that will easily snap when folded in half. Plan to remove any over ripe beans to encourage continued production.

Green Peas – Pick peas after the pods begin to swell but before they become tough and starchy. You may have to test every day or so to get a feel for when the peas are large enough to be worth picking but not too large. Hold the vine and pull the peas off so as not to break the vine.

Kale – Kale leaves can be pulled from the plant when they are about the size of your hand. Pulling the lower leaves will leave a plant which can continue to produce. As winter approaches you can mulch the plants with something like hay. The taste may even be better after the first frost. Kale will not grow as rapidly in cold weather but may continue to produce all winter.

Lima Beans – Pick limas when the pods are well filled and still green in color. Pods that have started to turn yellow may be left on the plants to harvest later to be used as dried beans.

Peppers – Sweet peppers can be picked while green and not fully ripe. Use a knife or pruning shears to remove from the plants. When left on the plant until they turn red they will be sweeter and have more vitamins.

Spinach – When you buy it at the market you will see that the entire plant has been cut off at the base. In order to extend the season I pick off the lower larger individual leaves from each plant and let the plant continue to grow. Pick the bright green leaves and discard those that have turned yellow.

Summer Squash – Pick while still immature. The flesh should be soft and tender. We like zucchini no more than about one inch in diameter so that they don't have so many large seeds. However, they sometimes manage to stay hidden from view until they get much larger. I will then use them to make a stuffed zucchini.

Tomatoes – Even green tomatoes will eventually ripen. However the best flavors will come from tomatoes which are allowed to stay on the vine until red. Tomatoes begin to lose their flavor below 55 so it is best not to store them in the refrigerator.

Winter Squash – Look for stems that have turned light yellow green. Cut rather than pull the squash from the plant leaving about two to three inches of stem on the squash for better storage.