

When to Harvest Vegetables & Fruit

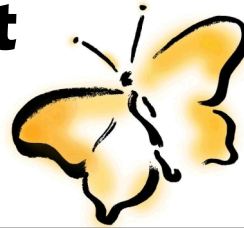
Campbell's

CULTIVATING IDEAS

2342 South 40th Street
(402) 483-7891

5625 Pine Lake Road
(402) 423-1133

www.campbellsnursery.com



To the experienced gardener, harvesting at the right time for peak ripeness and flavor may be second nature. But to the beginner, it is not obvious that a zucchini should be harvested when it is 8 inches long rather than 2 feet. Here are some guidelines for harvesting several of the most commonly grown vegetables and fruits.

VEGETABLES

BEETS: Young beets 2 inches in diameter are more tender than 4 to 5 inch beets. Greens from thinned beets are delicious when steamed; prepare the same way you would prepare chard or spinach.

BELL PEPPERS: Wait until fully convoluted pepper shape forms. Bell peppers can reach the size of a large apple. Mature peppers will turn red if left on the plant for 2 or 3 more weeks. Red bell peppers are sweeter than the immature green one and have a different flavor.

BROCCOLI: Harvest the green bud cluster, while the buds are still tight before there is any yellow color.

BRUSSELS SPROUTS: Heads form under each leaf. Harvest from the bottom up as the heads reach full size and are still firm. Break off the leaves as you go.

CABBAGE: Harvest when heads are solid but before they split. Check firmness by pressing the center of the head.

CARROTS: Harvest spring carrots before hot weather arrives; harvest fall carrots before the first moderate frost. The small carrots that you thin during the growing season are delicious.

CAULIFLOWER: Pick when curds are still firm but heads are 6 to 8 inches or more in diameter. If blanching (whitening) of the curd is desired, tie outer leaves above the head as it forms.

CORN: Corn is ready to pick when a kernel spurts milky fluid if punctured by your fingernail. Ears should be firm and full; the silk should be dry and dark. Eat at once, since flavor and tenderness deteriorates rapidly after picking.

CUCUMBERS: Harvest most slicing varieties when 1 1/2 to 2 inches in diameter and 5 to 8 inches long. Pick when green; yellow cucumbers are overripe and bitter.

EGGPLANT: Harvest when 6 to 8 inches long, depending on the variety. Most eggplants become rich purple and have a high gloss. When the eggplant is ready to harvest, its skin is soft enough to break with a fingernail. Immature eggplant will have less flavor; overly ripe ones will be bitter and have poor texture.

GREEN POLE BEANS: Harvest pods when the seeds make bulges but the skin is still smooth and shiny. Check seed package instructions for variations.

LETTUCE: Leaf varieties ('Black Seeded Simpson', 'Oak Leaf') are ready when individual leaves are large enough to pick. Harvest butterhead when the loose head has formed and head lettuce when the head is firm.

ONIONS AND GARLIC: Harvest green onions when they are the thickness of a pencil. For bulb onions and garlic, remove flower heads to encourage bulb formation; harvest when tops have died back and are completely dry and brown. Withhold water in the final 2 weeks.

PEAS: Snow peas are best when harvested young; pick when pea seeds just begin to show through the walls of the flat pods. Other peas are ready as soon as the peas reach full size. Feel the pods to see when they are full. Some pea plants produce full-sized peas with edible pods, such as 'Sugar Snap'. Harvest as they reach 4 inches long and finger thickness.

POTATOES: Harvest new potatoes when plants are done flowering. New potatoes are small and sweet, with a thin skin; but do not store well. For full-sized tubers that can be stored through the winter, harvest after the vines have yellowed and died back. If the soil is loose, harvest by hand; otherwise use a flat-tined fork to avoid damaging the tubers.

RADISHES: Harvest when roots have enlarged, while they are still crisp and sufficient, before they become woody and split.

SPINACH: Spinach is a cool-weather crop; it becomes tough and will bolt to seed in warm weather. You can pick as much as half the foliage on a spinach plant at one time. Spinach takes longer to mature in very cool weather, so take only a few leaves at a time from one plant. Break off the outer stalks while they are still young and tender.

SQUASH: Zucchini and other summer squash should be harvested when about 8 inches long. They lose tenderness as they grow larger but are still good for stuffing. Winter squash should remain on the vine until mid-October so the fruit wall thickens well for storage. They are ripe if a thumbnail cannot penetrate the skin.

TOMATOES: Allow tomatoes to ripen to uniform bright red (for most varieties). In hot weather, pick in the pink stage and allow to fully ripen indoors (heat slows down their coloring process, so a red tomato in hot weather may be overripe).

FRUITS

Harvest all fruit before the first frost. Store green ones in a frost-free place, wrapped individually in newspapers, until they ripen. Color and firmness and flavor help to determine harvest time for fruits. Most fruits are ripe when the stem breaks loose from its branch as the fruit is lifted gently. If you have trouble breaking the fruit loose, let it ripen another couple of days.

APPLES: As the ripening season progresses, test apples every few days for tenderness, color, and taste. The seeds turn brown when the apple is ready for eating.

APRICOTS: Harvest when fruits are soft and fully colored and have the characteristic apricot aroma. Apricots are particularly sweet when fully ripened on the tree.

BLACKBERRIES: Mature fruit is plump, juicy, sweet, and full in color. The fruit slips easily off the stem. Harvest every 2 or 3 days.

CANTALOUPE, MELONS: Harvest when the stem slips easily from the fruit. Ripe 'Crenshaw' and 'Casaba' melons will have an enticing aroma at the blossom end. The underside of watermelons turns from whitish to yellowish. When tapped, mature watermelons give a dull thud but immature watermelons give a metallic, ringing sound.

CHERRIES: Harvest when fruit is somewhat soft and full-flavored. Pick with stems on so the fruit won't deteriorate. Cool after harvesting.

GRAPES: As grapes mature and sugar content increases, cluster stem turn from green to brown. Berry color alone is not a good guide of maturity. Remove clusters with scissors or hand shears.

PEACHES, PLUMS: Peaches and plums are best left on the tree until ready to eat. Test for characteristic flavor and aroma.

PEARS: Harvest while still firm and somewhat green; allow to ripen in a cool place. If allowed to ripen on the tree, texture becomes gritty.

RASPBERRIES: Harvest when they develop full reddish color and slip easily off the stem.

STRAWBERRIES: Harvest when color is uniform and ripe red, and fruit is firm but beginning to soften slightly. Harvest with green caps to retain firmness and quality (pinch stem off about 1/4" above cap). Eat or refrigerate immediately, but use within 5 day. Don't wash until ready to eat.

BRUSSELS SPROUTS: Harvest while the buds are still tight and before there is any yellow color.

CORN: Ears are ripe when the end kernels can be split and release milky juice if pressed.

PEAS: Peas form distinct bulges and the pods feel full when they are ready to pick.

BEANS: Beans are most tender if they are harvested while the pod is still shiny.