



## Harvesting Vegetables

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Does a vine-ripened, home-grown tomato look different from a hot-house produced, grocery-store tomato? With tomatoes, it may be easy to tell when fruit is ripe, but for a beginning gardener, telling when to harvest produce may be difficult. Sometimes, as much produce is lost due to improper harvesting as due to insects. Here are descriptions of harvesting techniques for some common home grown vegetables.

- **Green or Wax Snap Beans**--Pick when the pods are full size. The newer varieties can be delayed until the beans are full size as long as the pods are still tender. They should break off easily with a "snap" when ready for harvesting. The seeds should not cause the pods to bulge.

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- **Pole and Half Runner Beans**--Harvest as snap beans when young and stringless or shell beans when mature.

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- **Lima Beans**--Pods should be green with swellings to show the beans inside. Open a pod or two; beans should be plump but still green or gray-green (not white). Pick often to prolong picking season.

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- **Sweet Corn**--Harvest while the husk is still dark green. Kernels should be full size and yellow or white to the tip of the ear, but still in the soft, "milk stage" of growth. Corn is sweetest just as the silk blackens. Remember that corn matures very rapidly in hot weather and that it should be refrigerated immediately after picking to prevent the sugar from turning to starch.

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- **Cucumbers**--Those of moderate size are best. Yellowing indicates old age. Don't allow old cucumbers to remain on the vine because they will keep the vine from bearing more cucumbers. Harvest while young and green when the seeds are soft. To use cukes for sweet pickles, harvest when two to three inches long; for dills, five to six inches; and for slicing, six to eight inches.

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- **Muskmelons**--They develop the best flavor when they ripen in warm, dry weather. They may taste more like cucumbers if they mature in cool, rainy weather. Pick them at "full slip" stage when the stem separates readily from the fruit. Fully ripe melons are sweetest. As the melon ripens, the netting becomes more prominent and the background color changes from a light green to a tan or yellow cast. After harvesting, the fruit can be held at room temperature for one to three days until the blossom end softens.

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- **Okra or Gumbo**--The best quality is when the pods are two to three inches long. They may have to be harvested daily to get the quality size. Pick within a few days after the flower petals have fallen whether pods are to be used or not. If pods are allowed to ripen, the plant ceases to produce.

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- **Eggplant**--Harvest when the fruits are large and shiny and an even deep purple color. Keep mature fruits picked off and plants will produce over a long period of time. Fruit in which the seeds have turned brown are of poor quality and past the edible stage. To tell if the fruit is mature, press the side of the fruit slightly. If the indentation remains, it is mature.

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- **Potatoes**--Dig them whenever tubers are large enough to eat. Dig only what will be used immediately, because they keep better in the soil than in a warm house or basement. Harvest when the tops have died down but before the first heavy freeze. When digging, avoid skinning and injury. Avoid long exposure of potatoes to light.

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- **Tomatoes**--Harvest them when fully vine-ripened and dark red. Regardless of the state of maturity, picked tomatoes should be put in the shade, not the sun. Light is not necessary for immature tomatoes to ripen. Sun causes uneven ripening and abnormal color formation. To obtain good color and flavor, hold partly ripened fruit at 70 degrees F then place in the refrigerator. Pick some green tomatoes and store in a cool (about 55 degrees F), moist, dark place before the first killing frost. Ripen by putting them in a location that is 70 degrees F.

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- **Cabbage**--Harvest anytime after a firm head develops. If some plants can't be harvested after they reach full maturity, bend them to the ground on one side and break part of the roots to reduce the possibility of head splitting from excess water intake. If heads have not split, they can be stored for long periods at temperatures of 32 to 45 degrees F.

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- **Broccoli**--Cut while clustered flower heads are firm and green. Take heads with leaves and 5 or 6 inches of stem (also edible). Don't damage short side branches; they will produce smaller heads if left to grow.

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- **Brussels sprouts**--Twist or snap off sprouts when they are firm and still deep green (usually about the time lowest big leaves start to yellow). Harvest lowest sprouts first. Upper ones will continue to enlarge to harvesting size. The flavor of Brussels sprouts improves after exposure to frosts.

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- **Cauliflower**--As soon as blossom heads (farmers call them curds) begin to form, pull the upper outer leaves over them to shade from the sun. This blanching process gives a white curd. Inspect from time to time and cut off curd when the flower sections begin to separate.

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- **Kale**--Cut off outer leaves from plants as needed. In thinning, pull smaller plants and use (but don't eat roots).

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- **New Zealand Spinach**--Pinch off or cut with a sharp knife 2 to 3 inch lengths of tender stem tips with leaves. New shoots will grow to replace them.

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- **Turnips and rutabagas**--Pull young plants with tiny roots to thin rows and give growing room to the remaining plants. Eat thinnings, tops and all. At 2-inch diameters, roots are tastiest, and tops are still good as greens. At 3 inches and above, roots are still good and store a little better. Late planted rutabagas can stay in the ground until needed.

(Compiled from Virginia Cooperative Extension Consumer Horticulture files.)

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