



When to Harvest Vegetables

Prepared by Robert R. Westerfield, Extension Horticulturist

If vegetables are not harvested at the proper stage of maturity, physiological processes occur that permanently change their taste, appearance and quality. The texture, fiber and consistency of all vegetables are greatly affected by the stage of maturity at harvest, by post-harvest handling and by the time interval between harvesting and serving.

Some vegetables are more highly-perishable than others. Sweet corn and English peas are difficult to maintain in an acceptable fresh state for even a very short time, while other vegetables have a much longer shelf life.

Harvesting most vegetables when they are young and storing them properly will help extend their shelf life. In some cases, newer hybrid varieties have helped add shelf life to certain vegetables. Lowering the internal temperature also helps to slow both the respiration process and quality decline. This is one reason for harvesting vegetables early in the day before the heat from the sun has warmed them. After the harvest, most vegetables should be kept cool and out of direct sunlight until they are either processed or consumed.

While harvesting too soon may result in only a reduction in yield, harvesting too late can result in poor quality due to development of objectionable fiber and the conversion of sugars into starches. A late harvest can also cause plants to terminate, or stop producing as they complete their reproduction process. Fully-mature vegetables left on the plant also attract more disease and insect problems. The following table gives suggestions for determining the proper stage of maturity for harvesting many vegetables.

Vegetable	Part Eaten	Too Early	Optimum Maturity	Too Late
Artichoke, Globe	Immature bloom	Small flower buds	When buds are 2" to 4" in diameter	Large buds with loose scales or bracts
Asparagus	Stem	Insufficient length	6" to 8" long; no fiber	Excess woody fiber in the stem
Beans, Lima	Seed	Insufficient bean size	Bright green puffy pod; large seed	Yellow pods
Beans, Pole Green	Pod and seed	Insufficient size	Bean cavity full; seed ¼ grown	Large seed; fibrous pods
Beans, Snap Bush	Pod and seed	Insufficient size	Turgid pods; seeds just visible	Fibrous pods; large seed
Beets	Root and leaves	Insufficient size	Roots 2" to 3" in diameter	Pithy roots; strong taste
Broccoli	Immature bloom	Insufficient size	Bright green color; bloom still tightly closed	Loose head; some blooms beginning to show
Brussels Sprouts	Head	Insufficient size; hard to harvest	Bright green; tight head	Loose head; color changes to green-yellow
Cabbage	Head	Insufficient leaf cover	Heads firm; leaf tight	Loose leaf; heads cracked open
Cantaloupes	Fruit	Stem does not want to separate from fruit	Stem breaks away easily and cleanly when pulled	Yellow background color; soft rind
Carrots	Root	Insufficient size	½" to ¾" at shoulder	Strong taste; oversweet
Cauliflower	Immature bloom	Head not developed	Compact head; fairly smooth	Curds open; separate
Celery	Stems	Stem too small	Plant stands 12" to 15" tall; medium-thick stem	Seed stalk formed; bitterness
Collards	Leaf	Insufficient leaf size	Bright green color; small midrib	Large midrib; fibrous
Corn, Sweet	Grain	Grain watery; small	Grain plump; liquid in milk stage	Grain starting to dent; liquid in dough stage
Cucumber	Fruit	Insufficient size	Dark green skin; soft seeds	Skin beginning to yellow; hard seeds
Eggplant	Fruit	Insufficient size	High glossy skin; side springs back when mashed	Brown seeds; side will not spring back when mashed
Lettuce, Head	Leaves	Head not fully formed	Fairly firm; good size	Heads very hard
Okra	Pod	Insufficient size	2" to 3" long; still tender	Fiber development; tough pods
Onions, Dry	Bulb	Tops all green	Tops yellow; ¾ fallen over	All tops down; bulb rot started
Peas, English	Seed	Peas immature and too small to shell	Peas small to medium; sweet bright green	Yellow pods; large peas

Vegetable	Part Eaten	Too Early	Optimum Maturity	Too Late
Peas, Southern (green)	Seed and pod	Peas immature and too small to shell	Seeds fully developed but still soft; soft pods	Hard seeds; dry pods
Pepper, Pimiento	Pod	Insufficient size	Bright red and firm	Shriveled pod
Pepper, Red Bell	Pod	Chocolate-colored pods	Bright red and firm	Shriveled pod
Potato, Irish	Tuber	Insufficient size	When tops begin to die back	Damaged by freezing weather
Potato, Sweet	Root	Small size; immature	Most roots 2" to 3" in diameter	Early plantings get too large and crack; damaged by soil temperature below 50°F
Rhubarb	Stem	Small size; immature	Stem 8" to 15" long is best	Fleshy stem becomes fibrous
Soybeans	Seed	Seeds not developed	Thick pods; bright green	Dry pods; seed shatters out
Squash, Summer	Fruit	Insufficient size	Rind can be penetrated with thumbnail	Penetrating with thumbnail is difficult; large seed
Squash, Winter	Fruit	Soft rind	Rind difficult to penetrate with thumbnail	Damaged by frost
Tomatoes	Fruit	<p>May be harvested in three stages:</p> <p>Mature green – tomato is firm and mature, color changes from green to light green, no pink color showing on blossom end. These tomatoes will store one to two weeks in the refrigerator.</p> <p>Pink – pink color about the size of a dime on the blossom end. At room temperature, these tomatoes will ripen in about three days.</p> <p>Ripe – tomato is full red but still firm. Should be used immediately.</p>		
Watermelon	Fruit	Green flesh; green stem is difficult to separate	Melon surface next to the ground turns from a light straw color to a richer yellow	Top surface has a dull look

Learning *for* Life

Circular 935

Reviewed November 2011

The University of Georgia and Ft. Valley State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and counties of the state cooperating. Cooperative Extension, the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, offers educational programs, assistance and materials to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, age, gender or disability.

**An Equal Opportunity Employer/Affirmative Action Organization
Committed to a Diverse Work Force**