Harvesting Fruits and Nuts

By growing fruits and nuts and observing plant development, you can harvest and use the products at just the right time - "the peak of perfection" - direct from the orchard or garden. The right time to capture that "peak of perfection" depends upon several factors:

1. The use of the product
2. The maturity of the product
3. The individual’s personal tastes

Persons accustomed to the taste of plant products purchased from the produce section of a grocery may find the taste of freshly picked products to be different. Consequently, it is suggested that one sample the home grown products at various stages of maturity to obtain the desired taste or use for the product. Match preferred taste with appearance of the product when harvested.

Almonds - Harvest in the fall, knock or shake them off the trees. Moisten the outer husks if they do not open easily, and crack open the softer, inner shells. Dry the kernels out of sun in well-ventilated, dry place. Store in air-tight containers in a cool place. If frozen, the nuts will last several years.

Apples - Pick when fruits have good red or yellow color. Can finish ripening at room temperature - if picked too green, will shrivel and lose flavor. Seeds should be dark brown. Under color, if present, should be strawy yellow on red varieties rather than green. Match appearance with taste before harvesting.

Apricot - When apricots are 3/4" in diameter, thin them by pulling off any excess fruit; those left should be about 3" apart. Hand pick when they reach the golden, yellow color and firm softness stage.

Avocado - Purple or dark varieties are usually mature when they start to turn from green to dark color. For the green fruits, maturity is indicated when there is a yellowish tint to the skin and stem. The green fruit becomes smoother, especially at the end opposite the stem; on many varieties, small, corky areas appear on the skin. Large size is NOT a sure indication of greater maturity. Also, seed coat turns from fleshy and light tan or yellowish white to a tissue-thin dark brown. They remain hard as long as they're on the tree, regardless of maturity, but are still susceptible to fruit damage.
Blackberry or Boysenberry - Harvest when berries are dull black and begin to get soft and sweet. Individual druplets of the fruit should be plump and juicy. Harvest every 2 or 3 days. Fruit should be so ripe that they drop off at the slightest touch.

Blueberry - Berries should be dark blue in color and easily removed from the cluster. Taste - if desired sweetness, go ahead and harvest; if not, wait a day or two. They will not continue to sweeten once they are picked. They usually turn blue 2-3 days before they develop maximum edible quality.

Cherry - Increase in size and develop full color as they ripen. Should be left on tree until juicy and fully flavored. Bird protection is generally necessary. Keep best if picked with stems attached. Grasp the stems and give them a twist; try not to break off the tiny spurs on the branch because fruit will be borne on them in future years.

Chestnut - Gather in fall, picking up from the ground every day or two to prevent them from getting moldy. To test whether they are sound and full of kernel, put them in a pail of water. Save only those that sink to the bottom. Shell after drying them. Store in plastic bags in a refrigerator. The bags should be left partially open to allow moisture to evaporate from the nuts until they are dry. To freeze chestnuts, shell them and put the kernels in airtight containers; they will keep frozen for a year or longer.

Currant - Currants for jelly making should be harvested prior to full ripeness. At this stage, the pectin content is high. Fully ripe currants are full size and color, juicy, and beginning to get slightly soft. To pick, grasp the stems at the tops of the cluster, twist the clusters off, then strip the berries from the clusters.

Elderberry - Fruit should be plump, of full color and just beginning to soften.

Garden Huckleberry - Harvest when the fruits are fully ripe and black in color.

Gooseberry - Pick gooseberries when they are still firm. Best to wear long leather gloves and strip the fruit from the canes. Background color should be light yellow on green cultivars.

Grapes - Longer they remain on vine, the sweeter they are. Will not ripen any further after being removed from the vine. They change color long before they are fully mature, so go by taste also. If quality is satisfactory, harvest; otherwise, wait a few days for optimum quality to develop. Protect against loss to birds and bees. Muscadine grapes are shaken from the vines on to a cloth. All others should be cut off in entire bunches with small hand shears. For jellies, pick a little underripe because they have a higher pectin content at that time.

Hazelnut (Filbert) - Once ripe nuts have fallen to the ground, gather them up every day or two so that they will not become moldy or be harvested by squirrels. Test to see whether they are sound and full of kernel by putting them in a pail of water. Save only those that sink to the bottom; after drying them, store in a cool place. If shelled and then stored in airtight containers in a freezer, hazelnuts will keep for nearly a year.

Peaches - Ripen fully on tree. Sugar content and quality increase considerably in the last few days as the fruit approaches maturity. Ground color turns from green to golden yellow as the fruit matures. In white fleshed varieties, ground color changes to white. When ripe, they can be separated from the twigs with very little effort.
Pears - Ripen best off the tree. Pick while fruit is still very firm and just turning yellowish green. Pears will continue to ripen and develop the best flavor when stored at room temperatures (65-70°F). Lenticels turn from white to brown in color. Skin develops a waxiness. Pears ready for harvest separate easily from tree spur with an upward twist of the fruit.

Pecan - Nuts should be gathered in fall as soon as possible after they drop to the ground, before the squirrels can harvest them; sometimes it may be necessary to knock or shake the nuts from the trees. Store them in a cool, rodent-proof place until used. If shelled and then stored in an airtight container in a freezer, pecans keep for as long as two years.

Persimmon - Thin out the fruit until the persimmons are 6-7" apart. Pick when fruit is soft by snipping them from the branches with shears; a small stem should be attached to each fruit. The fruit will continue to ripen off the trees.

Plums - Increase markedly in size and sugar content as they near maturity. Match appearance with taste to determine best stage for harvesting. Apply gentle pressure to the fruit with the thumb and determine if the flesh is beginning to soften. If so, the fruit should be ready for consumption. For cooking purposes, pick plums when they become covered with a waxy white coating called bloom, and are firm, but springy to the touch.

Raspberry - Ripe raspberries are of full color and separate easily from the receptacle or center part of the fruit. Harvest frequently, as berries continue to ripen over several days. Pick by gently lifting berries with thumb and fingers.

Strawberry - Fully ripe strawberries are uniformly red in color, firm, but beginning to soften slightly. Harvest the fruit with the calyx ("cap") on so that it will keep better. Do this by pinching the stem off about ½ inch above the "cap."

Walnut - Walnuts will fall to the ground by themselves as they ripen in the fall. When they fall, however, they should be gathered and husked promptly, then spread thinly in a shady place to dry. The kernels of walnuts have two coverings: a bony, usually ridged brown shell immediately surrounding the kernel and a pulpy, green outer hull or husk. The husks of English walnuts fall free from the nuts when they ripen, but those of butternuts and black walnuts adhere very tightly to the nuts. Since these husks contain a material that will stain hands brown, it is best to wear rubber gloves when handling them. One way to loosen the husks of butternuts and black walnuts is to place them in the driveway and drive the car back and forth over them (may stain a light-colored driveway). Store husked but unshelled walnuts in a plastic bag in a cool, dry, rodent-proof place; they will keep for about a year. Walnuts are easier to crack if they are soaked overnight in water to soften the shells; after the kernels are removed from their shells, they will keep for at least a year if stored in airtight containers in a freezer.

Adapted from: Ohio State Home Horticulture Center, HELP Notes, 76-2-11, by J. Sammons and M. E. Coon.

Prepared by: P.D. Relf, B. Adler, A. McDaniel