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# virginia home food production



## FACT SHEET

DEPARTMENT OF HORTICULTURE

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MH 350

### Harvesting Vegetables

By growing vegetables, one can observe plant development; harvest and use the products at just the right time - "the peak of perfection" - direct from the garden. But when is that right time - that "peak of perfection," - to harvest the products of your gardening? Harvesting depends upon:

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

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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.

Artichokes - See Globe or Jerusalem.

Asparagus - In newly planted asparagus, do not cut spears until 3rd year and then harvest for only 5-6 weeks or until spears become thin (less than  $\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter). In following years, the harvest season can be extended. Cut spears just under the soil surface. Harvest 6-8 inches tall, before tips begin to separate. Snapping spears off rather than cutting avoids injuring other young stems and eliminates some kitchen work. Any spears above ground after a killing frost are worthless. Process or refrigerate immediately.

Beans -

Fava Beans or Broad Beans - Pick immature, when only 6-8 inches long. This is when they are sweetest and most tender. To dry for later use, spread mature pods in a warm, dry place until pods and beans are completely dry. Then hull and store beans in insect-proof containers.

Green or Wax Snap Beans - Pods full size; beans very small or (newer) varieties can be delayed until beans are full size as long as pods are still tender. Should break easily with a 'snap' when ready for harvesting. Seeds should not cause pods to bulge.

Pole and Half Runner Beans - As snap beans when young and stringless; as shell beans when mature.

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- Lima Beans - Seeds are full size, but pods still have nice green color. End of pod is spongy. Can be allowed to remain on bush until dry to use for dry beans.
- Beets - Can be thinned when 6-8 inches tall and used as greens. Beet roots when they are 2-3 inches in diameter. Can be harvested at 1-1½ inches in diameter and this is best size when greens are going to be used also. Roots can be of good quality up to 2½-3 inches.
- Broccoli - Harvest large terminal bud cluster before any flowers open, then small side bud clusters can be harvested for many weeks through the summer. Harvest with 6-8 inches of stalks. Can live until severe freezing weather.
- Brussels Sprouts - Hard and compact. Twist or snap off sprouts when they are firm and still deep green (usually about the time lowest big leaves start to yellow). Remove lower sprouts as soon as they are large enough for use. Lower leaves may be removed to allow more room for sprouts to develop. Top leaves should not be removed. At onset of severe freezing weather, cut or pull up plants with good sprouts and store in cool cellar for winter use.
- Cabbage - Harvest anytime after a firm head develops. If some plants can't be harvested after they reach full maturity, bend to ground on one side to break part of roots to reduce possibility of head splitting. If heads have not split, they can be stored for long periods at temperatures of 32-45°F.
- Carrots - Harvest whenever roots reach acceptable size. Dig only quantity needed for immediate use and allow remainder to continue to increase in size. May be left in ground in winter and dug as needed. May contain more sugar when fully mature, but better eating when they are small, firm and well colored. Normal harvest when roots are 1/2-3/4 inches in diameter.
- Cauliflower - Harvest before the curds begin to open or become "ricey." Heads still compact and fairly smooth. Cut off when flower sections begin to separate.
- Celeriac - Harvest when the thickened stem and root portion reaches 2½-3½" in diameter. If it is to be stored, leave in the garden until just before the first fall frost.
- Celery - Pick when of medium height and thickness (12-15"). Flower stalks indicate bitterness. Harvest as soon as several petioles attain sufficient size. While young and tender, the lower leaves (8-10" long) may be removed from a few plants and used in salads, soups and cooked dishes. If the plants are to be stored with roots attached, leave them in the garden until just before first fall frost. If left in soil during early winter, pile soil and straw around them to protect against freezing and pull the stalks as needed.
- Chard - When plants become 6-8 inches tall, thin to 4-6 inches between plants and use these small plants in cooking. Thereafter, remove only the outer, older leaves as they become 8-10" long but are still young and tender. New leaves will continue to grow from the center of each plant for a continuous harvest of young, tender chard. Discard old, tough leaves, as they will prevent new foliage from being produced.
- Chinese Cabbage - Harvest when 15-18" tall (80-90 days after seed sown). Pull up plants and cut off roots, pull away and discard tough, outer leaves.
- Chives - Cut or break off new leaves at the ground level as they appear in early spring. Use young, tender leaves throughout the season.
- Collard - Cut for greens when leaves are young and not over 12" long. New growth from center of each plant will provide a continuous harvest of young, tender leaves.

Corn, Sweet - Harvest while husk is still dark green. Kernels should be full size when mature yellow or white color to the tip of the ear, but still in the soft, milk stage of growth. Is sweetest just as silk blackens. Matures very rapidly in hot weather. Refrigerate immediately to prevent the sugar from turning to starch. Ready for harvest about 3 weeks after the first silk appears. Pierce a kernel with thumbnail: milky juice means corn is just right; clear juice means wait a day or two; pasty fluid means you've missed your chances for perfection on that ear.

Cowpea or Black-Eyed Pea - When seeds are near full size, but still bright green; as mature or dry seeds, when seeds are full size and dry. Dry seeds are used cooked, baked and in soups.

Cucumbers - Moderate size are best. Yellowing indicates old age. Don't allow old cucumbers to remain on vine - vine will stop bearing. Harvest while young and green and the seeds are soft. For sweet pickles: 2-3" long. For dills: 5-6" long. For slicing: 6-8" long. Lemon cucumber should measure no wider than 3". Japanese and Armenian cucumbers retain quality even up to 20" long. Cut or pull, leaving short stem. Remove by turning cucumber parallel to the vine and giving it a quick snap. Prevents vine damage and results in a clean break.

Eggplant - Harvest when fruits are large and shiny. Harvest when reach a uniformly deep purple color and are properly sized for the variety (4-6" long). 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. Heavy bearing taxes small plants, so remove all but 3 or 4 fruits from each plant. Pick long slender Japanese eggplant when finger size to hotdog size; one plant will bear dozens if you keep them picked. Press side of fruit slightly, indentation remains - fruit mature. Harvest before flesh becomes tough and seeds begin to brown.

Endive or Escarole - When plant is fully developed (10-12" across) and the center leaves have been blanched (by covering or tying loosely to exclude light) for 2-3 weeks.

Garden Cress - When leaves are 3-5" long. You can sow again in late summer for a fall harvest.

Garlic - When bulbs are mature, the tops are dry and yellow. Pull up bulbs and allow to dry in the garden for several days. When dry, clean by removing outer loose portions of the sheath and trimming the roots off close to the bulb with a sharp knife.

Globe Artichoke - Cut flower buds (artichokes) when they are 2-4" in diameter and while scales or bracts are still tight. Cut with 1½" of stalk.

Gourd - Edible cultivars - when fruits are 8-10" long and young and tender. Ornamental cultivars - when fruits are mature and fully colored but before first fall frost. Stems turn brown.

Horseradish - Dig roots in late fall or the following early spring after planting.

Jerusalem Artichokes - Dig up tubers around November when leaves begin to die. Store in airtight container in refrigerator or in cool place imbedded in moist sand or sawdust. Best to dig up only amount that is immediately needed.

- Kale - Break off outer leaves as they become 8-10" long. New leaves will continue to grow from the center of each plant for a continuous harvest.
- Kohlrabi - Best when harvested at only 2-3 inches in stem diameter. When bulbous parts are between a golf ball and a baseball, cut at soil level.
- Leeks - Harvest when they reach an edible size but before bulbs exceed 1 inch diameter. One half to one inch diameter is best. Use when blanched (white) portion is 5-6" long.
- Lentil - When pods turn yellow. Mature seeds are used in soups.
- Lettuce - Good when crisp, tender, and free of discoloration. Firm heads desirable but very hard heads may be over-mature. Refrigerate lettuce in a separate crisper from other foods because many ripening fruits give off a gas which causes brown spots to develop throughout the lettuce head. Leaf lettuce - Cut or pull outer leaves (4-6" long) as you can use them. Pick in the morning when leaves are plump with moisture. Use before seed stalk starts.
- Mushroom (Cultivated) - When mushroom is 1-2" across but before cap separates from stem.
- Muskmelons (cantaloupes) - Develop best flavor when they ripen in warm, dry weather. (May taste more like cucumbers if they mature in cool, rainy weather.) Pick at "full slip" stage - when the stem separates readily from the fruit. Fully ripe is sweetest. As the melon ripens, the netting becomes more prominent. The background color between the netting 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. Casaba: leave on the vine until blossom end softens and rind turns yellow. Crenshaw: is ripe (and highly perishable) when dark green skin develops yellow streaks. Honeydew: pick when blossom end softens and white skin turns cream color. (Also see Watermelons.)
- Mustard - Harvest outer leaves when 6-8" long. New leaves will provide continuous harvest until flavor becomes strong and leaves become tough in texture from hot weather. Seed again in late summer for milder flavor and tender texture.
- Okra or Gumbo - Best quality when pods are 2-3" long. May have to harvest daily to get ideal quality size. Pick within a few days after flower petals have fallen, whether pods are to be used or not. If pods are allowed to ripen, the plant ceases to produce.
- Onions - Harvest when half or more of the tops have fallen over. Do not wait too long after this occurs. Keep well if necks and skins are allowed to dry thoroughly before storing.
- Parsley - When outer leaves are 3-4" long. Continue to remove outer leaves while they are still young and tender throughout the summer and until heavy frosts in late fall. Start a new plant from seeds sown in a pot outdoors around August 1 for indoor growing and winter harvest.
- Parsnips - Leave parsnips in the ground through the winter. Cover with mulch or dig in early winter and store as other root crops. Have better flavor and quality if exposed to near freezing temperatures before they are eaten.
- Pea - Harvest when pods are well filled and eat while peas are still tender and sweet. High temperature causes rapid loss of sugar content. Smaller ones are tastier than the bigger ones. Sugar or snow peas with edible pods should be picked as soon as peas are perceptible inside the pods.

- Peanuts - When foliage begins to yellow, loosen soil around plants with spading fork and pull up plants. Dry peanuts (still on vines) in a warm, airy, shady place for 2 weeks to cure them.
- Peppers - Usually harvested after reaching full size, while still in the green or yellow stage. They may be allowed to mature (turn red) on the plant (they are mellower and sweeter). Cut instead of pull to avoid breaking branches.
- Potatoes - Dig whenever tubers are large enough to eat. Dig only what you need for immediate use. Keep better in soil than in warm house or basement. Harvest when the tops have died down but before the first heavy freeze. When digging, avoid skinning and long exposure to light. Store where no danger of freezing. A well-ventilated, dark room with temperature at 45° F is ideal.
- Pumpkin - Allow to ripen fully on the vine. Rind should be hard and seeds mature. Bottom of fruit touching soil should be cream to orange in color. Cut the stem from the vine as fruit without a stem will not store well. Store in dry area 50-55° or a little higher.
- Radishes - Harvest just as soon as roots are edible size. Usually 1-1½" diameter.
- Rhubarb - Do not harvest first year and limited harvest the second year. Harvest from early spring to June, thereafter. Allow leaves to remain on to store food reserves. Stalks pulled, not cut. Leaf blades removed and only the fleshy stem or petiole is used. Usually 8-15" long.
- Rutabaga - Will stand some frost but should be dug before ground freezes.
- Salsify - In late fall, preferably after early frost, or in early spring before new growth starts. If the roots are to be left in the soil over winter, cover after early frosts with 3-5" of soil to avoid injury from alternate freezing and thawing.
- Shallots - Usually eaten in green stage. At maturity the leaves turn yellow and die down and the bulbs have reached maximum size. To harvest, pull up the clumps and spread to dry on flat screen outdoors or braid and hang with tops indoors in a dry, well-ventilated place. After 3 or 4 weeks, several layers of dried skin will have formed on the outside. Then store as onions for 4-6 months.
- Spinach - May be harvested from the time the plants have 6-8 leaves until the seed stem develops. The entire plant is cut off at the soil level.
- New Zealand Spinach - Pick only young leaves or tips of older ones. Harvest when plant reaches 8-10 inches in length. Branches are cut or snapped off 3-4 inches back from the tips. Can be continued throughout the growing season as new branches are formed.
- Summer Squash - Harvest when immature - only about 6-8" long, and 1½-2" in diameter. If the rind is too hard to be marked by the thumbnail, it is too old to use. Old fruit should be removed from the plant immediately to permit new fruit to develop. Check plants every day. Yellow crookneck: taste best when 4-7" long. Pick when pale yellow rather than golden, before skin hardens, Scalloped squash (pattypan): when it's grayish or greenish white, before it turns ivory white. Best while small, even silver-dollar size.

Winter Squash - Allow to ripen fully on the vine. Let develop appropriate color for the variety and a hard rind. Harvest before heavy frost. Cut the stem (2-3") from the vine as fruit without a stem will not store well. Store where dry and 45-55°F. Pick after vine dries up.

Sweet Potatoes - Dig roots in late September or early October. Handle roots carefully when harvesting and "cure" by keeping the roots in a warm place for 2-3 weeks. Temperatures of 80-90°F good for this period. Store roots at 55-60°F. Lower temperatures cause poor quality.

Tomatoes - Harvest when fully vine ripened (dark red). Regardless of 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°F then place in refrigerator. Pick some green tomatoes and store in a cool (55°F), moist, dark place before the first killing frost. When desired, ripen a few fruits at 70°F.

Turnips - Harvest when roots are young and tender - 1-2" in diameter. Turnips that remain in ground until after freezing weather can be dug and stored for winter use.

Vegetable Soybeans - For fresh green seeds, pick when pods are thick but still bright green. For easy shelling, heat pods in boiling water until color darkens. Only use the seeds since the pods are tough and fibrous. For mature dry seeds, harvest when pods are dry but before pod begins to open. Use for cooking, baking, bread or sprouts.

Water Cress - Pick tips of stems 6-8" long, especially in spring and fall. This is when leaves and stems are fully developed but still bright green and tender.

Watermelons - Generally ready for harvest when the curl (a string-like, curled tendril near the stem attachment to the fruit) has begun to shrivel and dry up. Wait until fruit reaches the size described in the seed catalog before looking for signs of maturity. When the fruit attains full size, check the color of the rind where it touches the ground. A ripe melon will have a cream or yellow color (not white). When thumped, a metallic ring indicates immaturity and a dull or muffled sound indicates ripeness. Watermelons will not continue to ripen after harvest. Cut, not pull, watermelons from vines.

Witloof Chickory - Pull roots after first fall frost. Cut tops to 1" and rest roots in soil or other moisture holding material in a dark, cool (60-65°F) location. Cover tops of roots to a depth of 4-6". Harvest underground, compact, white leaf bases as they grow from the top of each root.

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

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