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When to Harvest Fruits and Vegetables

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To obtain a quality food product from your garden for fresh use or storage, you must harvest fruits and vegetables at their proper stage of development. Improper harvesting influences quality as well as continued productivity of the plant. This is a guide to harvesting some of the common fruits and vegetables grown in Nebraska.

When to Harvest Fruit

Apple -- There is no sure method for home gardeners to determine maturity for all cultivars (varieties). If picked prematurely, the fruit is likely to be sour, tough, small and poorly colored; if picked overripe, it may develop internal breakdown and store poorly.

To harvest apples correctly, you must be familiar with the term "ground color." Ground color is the color of an apple's skin, disregarding any areas that have become red. In red fruited cultivars, observe the portion of the apple that faces the interior of the tree. When the ground color of red cultivars changes from leaf green to yellowish green or creamy, the apples are ready to harvest. In yellow cultivars, the ground color becomes golden. Mature apples with a yellowish-green background color are suitable for storage. Apples will improve in storage if they are picked when hard but mature: i.e., showing the mature skin color. Most apple cultivars have brown seeds when ready for harvest. However, seeds may become brown several weeks before proper picking maturity. When harvesting, do not remove the stems from apples that will be stored.

Cherry, red, tart -- The size of the fruit increases until mature. Sample the fruit to determine the proper time to harvest. It should be fully colored and flavorful as quality will not improve after harvesting.

Currant -- Harvest currants for jelly when they are slightly underripe for high pectin content. Pick them fully ripe to use for jams or if they are to be stewed. Fully ripe currants are colored, juicy and beginning to soften.

Elderberry--The fruit should be fully colored and just beginning to soften. Quality does not improve after harvest.

Gooseberry -- Pick when the berries are firm and a transparent greenish-yellow with darkened seeds. Fruit of some of the newer cultivars often turns a very light to dark red when mature. Overmature fruit is purplish. Quality does not improve after harvest.

Grape -- Taste grapes to determine peak ripeness. Grapes change color before they are ripe.

Peach -- Ground color is the best guide for maturity. Harvest when ground color changes from green to full yellow. Red color is not a reliable index of maturity. Taste one or more of the fruits before harvesting to correlate ground color with flavor.

Pear -- Harvest when the ground color changes from a dark green to a yellowish green and before the fruit is tree-ripe. Additional guides to proper harvesting time are when the fruit separates from the twig with an upward twist of the fruit and when the lenticels (spots on fruit surface), which are white or green on immature fruits, become brown.

Plum -- Harvest when the flesh starts to soften. The skin changes color before the fruit is mature.

Raspberry -- Harvest when the fruit is full color and separates easily from the center.

Strawberry -- Harvest when uniformly red and beginning to soften. Harvest with the cap.

When to Harvest Vegetables

Asparagus -- Begin harvesting the third year after planting. Harvest when the spears are 6 to 10 inches above the ground but before the heads open. Cut or snap spears off at the soil line. Stop harvesting if spears show a marked decrease in size. Maximum harvest period is 6 to 8 weeks.

Snap Bean -- Harvest before pods are full sized and when seeds are tender and about one-fourth developed. Harvesting usually begins 2 to 3 weeks after first bloom. Don't allow beans to mature on plants or bean production will decrease.

Bean, lima, broad -- Harvest when pods are fully developed and seeds are green and tender.

Beet -- Harvest when roots are 1 1/4 to 2 inches in diameter. Some cultivars may maintain quality in larger sizes.

Broccoli -- Harvest when flower head is fully developed, but before the flowers begin to open. Cut 6 to 7 inches below the flower head. Side heads will develop after the main head is cut.

Cabbage -- Harvest when heads are solid, but before they split. On early cabbage, cut just beneath the solid head. Small lateral heads will develop from buds in the axils of the older leaves.

Carrot -- Harvest when 3/4 to 1 inch in diameter or smaller when thinning. For storage, leave carrots in soil until a light frost occurs. Use care when harvesting, since bruising favors the development of soft rot during storage.

Cauliflower -- Cover curds when they are 2 to 3 inches in diameter by tying the outer leaves loosely

about the head, or using leaves from other plants in the garden. Check for developing curds every 2 to 3 days, and retie if further development is necessary. Harvest when the heads are full sized but still white and smooth.

Celery -- Harvest when plants are 10 to 12 inches tall.

Cucumber -- Proper harvesting size is determined by product use. *Pickles*: Sweets are 1 1/2 to 2 inches long; dills are 3 to 4 inches long. *Fresh slicing* are 7 to 9 inches long and a bright dark green. Leave a short piece of stem on each fruit. Harvest daily and don't allow fruit to mature.

Eggplant -- Harvest when fruit is firm and bright purple to black in color.

Jerusalem Artichoke -- Harvest tubers after a hard frost. Tubers can be stored in the ground over winter and harvested early in spring or, with mulch protection, during most of the winter.

Kohlrabi -- Harvest when the thickened stem is 2 to 3 inches in diameter.

Muskmelon -- Harvest when a crack appears completely around the base of the fruit stem. The fruit will readily separate from the stem.

Okra -- Harvest when 3 to 5 inches long and tender.

Onion -- Correct harvesting stage is determined by the type and product use. Harvest onions grown from sets when they are 6 to 9 inches tall for immediate table use. Onions grown from seed for fresh use should be harvested when the bulbs are 1/4 to 1 inch in diameter. Harvest seed grown onions for boiling when the bulbs are 1 1/2 inches in diameter. Harvest for storage (seed or set grown) when the tops have weakened and fallen over and the bulbs are 2 or more inches in diameter. Harvest before hard frost.

Parsnip -- Harvest after a hard frost or in early spring before new growth starts. To harvest in spring, place a 3- to 5-inch soil mulch over the parsnips. Parsnips are not poisonous if harvested in early spring.

Pea -- Harvest when the pods are fully developed and still tender, and before seeds develop fully.

Edible Pod Pea -- Harvest when the pods are fully developed, but before seeds are more than one-half full size.

Peanut -- Harvest when plants turn yellow at season's end or before the first early frost.

Pepper, green -- Harvest when fruits are full sized and firm. **Red** -- Allow peppers to remain on the plant until they become completely red. This usually requires an additional 2 to 3 weeks.

Potato -- For storage, harvest when full sized with firm skins. Tubers continue to grow until the vine dies. For new potatoes, harvest at any early stage of development. This is usually when tubers are 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches in diameter.

Pumpkin -- Harvest pumpkins when they are fully colored and the skins have hardened enough to resist the fingernail test. Harvest before a killing frost.

Rhubarb -- Do not harvest the first year after planting; harvest only a few stalks the second year. Established plantings can be harvested for approximately 8 weeks. The quality of the stalks decreases

toward the end of the harvest period. Harvest only the largest and best stalks by grasping each stalk near the base and pulling slightly to one direction. Note: there is no evidence to show that stalks harvested from frost damaged plants are poisonous, so they should be considered safe to eat.

Rutabaga -- Harvest when the roots are full sized but before a heavy frost.

Soybean--*for fresh use*, shell out just before pods begin to dry. *For dried use*, harvest when pods turn brown but before shattering occurs.

Squash, summer type -- Harvest when fruit is young and tender. Your fingernail should easily penetrate the rind. Long-fruited cultivars, such as zucchini, are harvested when 1 1/2 inches in diameter and 4 to 8 inches long; scallops are taken when 3 to 4 inches long.

Squash, winter type -- Harvest when mature. The rind should be firm and glossy and not easily punctured by your thumbnail. The portion that contacts the soil is cream to orange when mature. Leave a portion of the vine (2 to 3 inches) attached to the fruit to help prevent storage rot. Harvest squash before a heavy frost.

Sweet corn -- Harvest when kernels are completely filled and in the milk stage. Use your thumbnail to determine this. The silks are dry and brown at this stage.

Sweet potato -- Harvest in late fall before the first early frost.

Tomato -- For peak quality, harvest 5 to 8 days after fruits are fully colored. Tomatoes lose their firmness quickly if they are overripe.

Turnip -- Harvest when roots are 1 1/2 to 3 inches in diameter.

Watermelon -- Harvest when full sized. The portion in contact with the soil is cream to yellow when mature.

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