

# HOW AND WHEN TO HARVEST FRUITS FOR PEAK FLAVOR

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Many people don't eat fruit because they cannot find fruit that tastes good. I was one of those people, until I started growing my own. In the mid 1980's, I was fortunate enough to be employed by the USDA Agricultural Research Service, Small Fruit Laboratory, in Beltsville, Maryland. As a research technician, I worked with some of the world's top pomologists and fruit breeders. My main resource for fruit management was "*Small Fruit Crop Management*," edited by Dr. Gene J. Galletta, the world-renowned small fruit crop plant breeder, who was also my supervisor.

## APPLES

John Chapman, better known as "Johnny Appleseed," generally receives most of the credit for planting apple trees across the United States. However, more credit should go to a Quaker pioneer and abolitionist named Henderson Lewelling. Without him, the state of Washington might never have become our largest apple producing state. When he arrived in Washington and began planting trees, the trees were watered daily and the family received the remaining water. A shiny red apple is an indicator that the fruit is almost ripe but not quite ready for picking. Apples should be picked just after the skin loses its shine. Pick these gems and place in a ventilated container in a cool, dry space.



## BLACKBERRIES, BLUEBERRIES, RASPBERRIES AND STRAWBERRIES

Blackberries and raspberries always give you a physical hint when they are ready for harvest. If you give them a slight tug and they don't pop right off, you are too early. Patience is an agricultural virtue. If you give them a slight tug and they pop right off, then it's time to eat! A tip from Dr. Galletta is that blackberries come off with the core intact and raspberries pull away from their core. Blueberries require that you take your time and pick only the berries that are completely blue. The fruit will sweeten if you let it stay on the vine. Don't pick any berries with a green color. Investing in good netting will ensure that the birds will not harvest more than you.



## CHERRIES

Cherry trees were probably first cultivated in Asia Minor, in what is now known as Turkey, near the town of Cerasus, which loaned its name to the cherry or cerise. Never judge a cherry by its color. Cherries, whether they be the sweet red, sweet yellow or sour varieties, all have very unique colors and flavor characteristics. To determine harvest time, very gently press the fruit with your thumb. If it seems a little hard, come back again in a few days and test again. Depending on weather conditions, they should be plumper and softer. When picking, it really does not make much difference whether you leave the stem on the tree or not.



## FIGS

Historically, the leaf of the fig tree has been more important than the fruit. Leaves certainly helped to cover Adam's loins. Egyptian royalty adored the fig and counted it among one of the foods they served at banquets. They also carried this fruit with them into the afterlife. Figs also played a role in the death of Queen Cleopatra. It is said that the Egyptian queen was delivered the asp that killed her in a basket of figs. There are a few reasons to grow figs: nutrition and ease of production. In some cases, you will have to protect the plant in the winter until it gets fully established. Wait until the figs are ripe. Depending on the variety and color, the figs may be a dusty light green or dark brown color. The fig tree and the blastophaga wasp, which is its preferred pollinator, have an 80 million year relationship. When the necks of the fruit wilt and the fruit hangs down, it is time to harvest and enjoy. The frown on your face from the taste will tell you that you picked them too early.



## GRAPES

Grapes were probably the first fruits cultivated. It is said that the Egyptian goddess Isis found them growing along the banks of the Nile River. She then proceeded to present them to her husband, the god Osiris, to spread throughout the world. I have very fond memories of my grandfather's small Concord grape orchard in his Northwest Washington, D.C., backyard in the 60's. The fragrance, the deep rich color of the grapes, and the army of pollinators working on the grapes, was very intense. Grapes are ripe when they are fully colored. Also, grapes are ripe when they are intensely aromatic; you will be able to smell them before you see them! There are so many varieties of grapes. If you choose to grow grapes, try to find a variety that does well in this region. Growing a good grape "organically" will be one of your biggest gardening achievements. There are low and high acidic grapes. Grapes develop more sugar and lose acid as they remain on the vine. For some varieties, this is a good thing; for some, it is not. It depends on what the grapes will be used for. There are table, wine and jam grapes. Harvesting is best done by snipping your grapes off the vine, one cluster at a time. Store your harvest in a cool, dark place that has good air circulation and moderate humidity. I would choose a place like this over a refrigerator, any day.



## MELONS

This is sometimes a challenging crop to grow; however, there are a few signals that indicate its readiness for harvest. Cantaloupes, which are also called muskmelons, are monoecious plants. They have both male and female flowers; only the female flowers produce fruit. The netting or "venation" on the muskmelon will become more pronounced as the melon matures on the vine. The melon will separate easily from the vine when it has fully ripened. It is important to observe the crop after the flower has been pollinated; many crops will ripen from the blossom end of the crop to the stem. The blossom end will be somewhat soft to the touch. The melon will have to be cut from the vine; it will not slip off from the stem.



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## WATERMELONS

The origin of the watermelon is Africa. In Naples, Italy, where watermelon slices are sold on the street, there is a saying that watermelon is “the only way to eat, drink and wash your face at the same time.” The harvesting of the watermelon crop is a little different from other melons. You can use that age old technique of thumping it with your forefinger and listening for that deep, hollow sound. Also, look for a weathered “tendrill” closest to the melon, right there where the stem of the melon meets the vine.



## PEACHES

The peaches sold in stores today are far removed from the wild fruit that originated in China. Back then, the peach was hard, small and sour. The peaches available in some stores still have those characteristics. Farmers market peaches are always the second best alternative; growing your own is best. You must choose the right variety and manage them correctly. When I started working at the USDA, Agriculture Research Service (USDA-ARS) in Beltsville, Maryland, in the '80s, our Fruit Research Lab grew peaches--good quality peaches! Peaches, plums and cherries are called stone fruits, due to the flesh or pulp which encloses the seed. On every peach there is a special place to press to see if it is ripe or not. Peaches ripen from the bottom toward the stem and from the smooth side to the split side. Press gently on one of the upper shoulders of the split side. If it gives a little, it is ripe.



## STRAWBERRIES

Wild strawberries grow on many continents and in many climates. The early colonists of North America could barely walk around without stepping on them. They grew everywhere, like a weed. In the mid-80's to the mid-90's, we were growing over 300 different, unnamed varieties of strawberries at the USDA-ARS Fruit Laboratory. One of my duties was to walk the fields with the plant breeder to taste and give a grade to all of these different varieties. There was also some plant breeding involved; the old-fashioned way. This was done by using a small paint brush to transfer pollen from one plant to another. These were the days before biotechnology, which is a little quicker. The berries containing desirable traits were given a name and put on the market. The berry on which I worked the most was called “Ovation.” It has a good amount of disease resistance. It takes years to develop a disease-resistant and flavorful strawberry. A ripe strawberry should be dark red. Start observing your berries when they are bright red, and then wait a few more days until they turn dark red. The extra days help to produce more sweetness in the berry. It is good to check the underside of the berry, just to ensure it is fully ripe. If you have time, you can give the berries a little turn to make sure the ripening is uniform. It's important to pick the ripe berries every other day; this helps to keep the plant producing.



## RESOURCES

Small Fruit Crop Management, Gene J. Galletta and David G. Himelrick, Editors. 1990

The Back Yard Berry Book, A hands on guide to growing Berries, Brambles and Vine fruits in the home. 1995; Stella Otto.

The Back Yard Orchardists: A Complete guide to growing fruit trees in the home garden. 1995, Stella Otto.

The Greengrocer, 1972, Joe Carcione and Bob Lucas

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