

# HOW AND WHEN TO HARVEST VEGETABLES FOR MAXIMUM FLAVOR

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Over time, we have been transformed from a very agrarian society to a very urban society. One question, which is not often asked, is "When is produce at its peak of maturity for consumption?" An aspect of being a good "urban farmer" is knowing when produce is at its peak of perfection. This peak often coincides with maximum nutritional levels if many of the production rules of good crop selection and management are followed. Vegetables are very diverse when it comes to harvesting. Some can stay in the ground for weeks until you are ready to harvest them. Others, like okra, will award you with non-edible fruits if you are two to three days late in picking. When vegetables are past their prime, they go through permanent changes that alter their taste, appearance, quality, and their potential for further production. Here is a guide to help with harvesting produce for peak flavor.

## BEANS

It is best to check beans on a daily or every other day schedule. If you are growing the standard green beans, let them develop fully. 4-5 inches long is the best length to pick these beans. The types of green beans are bush and pole or (climbing). The pods should snap when broken. If you are growing the famed "French filet" green beans, you need to pick these daily when pods reach 1/8 inch in diameter, regardless of the length. Most green beans will remain crisp with good flavor if wrapped in plastic and stored in the crisper section of your refrigerator.



## BEETS

Some of the most delicious beets I have ever harvested were 1½ to 3 inches in diameter--golf ball size. In some cases, if beets grow larger than this in diameter, the texture of the flesh changes. This process increases when plants are not supplied with adequate water during hot weather. The tops of the beets are edible, but remember that when storing the beets for later use, leave about ½ inch of the stem on to reduce bleeding and to slow down water movement from the roots to the leafy stems.



## BROCCOLI

Harvest this crop when the buds are still somewhat tight and before tiny flowers start to open. If the buds open and show their lemon colored flowers, it's still edible but past its prime. Cut the main shoot head on a slant, first, and leave about 4-5 inches of stem. This will prevent rot and encourage the production of side shoots for your enjoyment.



## BRUSSELS SPROUTS

This is a crop not grown very often by many gardeners. I have included it because it can be a very valuable crop for winter food security. This crop, like all other plants in the Brassica family, changes flavor after it has been covered by a couple of mild frosts. The buds mature from the bottom up and are best when picked at the 1 inch in diameter range. If you are a fan of larger buds, top the plant back about four inches before you begin to harvest.



## CABBAGE

This crop will be somewhat forgiving when it comes to harvest time. When the heads get larger, they tend to split, but are still edible. An old truck farmer taught me that if the heads start to split, give them a quarter turn to slow this process.



## CARROTS

The amazing thing about carrots is their ability to store somewhat well in the soil past maturity. A layer of straw will help them overwinter better. We usually start looking at these root crops when they are ½ to 1 inch in diameter. Harvest until frost, but before the soil freezes. Check for the color needed by pushing the soil away from the carrot about 1/4 inch. Those top are edible and extremely nutritious. The carrots store better when the tops are removed. Dig with the garden fork rather than pulling.



## CAULIFLOWER

Harvest when heads are 6-8 inches in diameter. Look for solid firm heads. If you wait until the curds (heads) open, you have missed its prime.



## CORN

This dynamic and powerful crop has been used to nourish civilizations for a millennium. You can begin harvesting about 18-20 days after the silks appear. When the silks start to turn dry and brown, the crop is ready. Peel back the husk and check for ear fullness and plump kernels. You can use the fingernail test to check a few kernels for the milky white liquid which signals its ripeness. To harvest, pull up and then down, twist, and pull again.



## CUCUMBERS

This is another fast-growing vegetable crop. Check daily to prevent waste, and allow the crop to fill out. You will be rewarded with crispy and juicy cucumbers; pick fruits when they are 6 to 9 inches long. There are different types of cucumbers: slicing and pickling. Slicing cucumbers should be harvested when 6-7 inches in length and 1½ to 2 inches in diameter; pickling cucumbers may be smaller. With all cucumbers, harvest often to encourage the production of more female flowers. This will result in more fruits.



## EGGPLANT

If you have ever tried growing eggplant, the Asian or Italian varieties, you have probably noticed that the small ones taste a little different from the larger, more mature ones. When eggplant gets past its prime, it will be soft and seedy; this seediness causes bitterness. Fruit harvested at the correct time will be firm, and somewhat sweet. Harvest the fruits when they are 4 to 6 inches in length or about one-third of its mature size. Always use scissors or pruning shears to harvest eggplant. Pulling the fruit off the plant will injure the plant.



## KALE AND COLLARDS

Collard greens are a Southern staple, with good heat tolerance. Some cold-hardy varieties do well in the fall. Kale on the other hand, is an early spring and fall crop. Each of these crops can be harvested 35-40 days after planting. For both, you will want to harvest the outer, larger leaves first, leaving the inner leaves to promote new growth. A few mild frosts will enhance the sweetness of both of these crops due to starch conversion to sugar in the plant. This is characteristic of all plants in the Brassica family.



## LEEKS

This can be an unfamiliar but worthwhile crop to grow. Harvest this crop anytime the stem is an inch in diameter or larger. Leeks are best used when small for maximum flavor. Some varieties will overwinter in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions of the United States. Harvest before March. After that, they sometimes develop a hard core in the center that will not soften, no matter how long you cook them.



## LETTUCE

This crop can be harvested in different phases, small salad mix or larger for layering on that summer sandwich. For loose leaf varieties, just pick the outer leaves, as needed. Some varieties of lettuce are called "cut and come again." For those varieties, just trim the plant down to an inch above the soil level and wait for the plant to regrow to be harvested again. Romaine and Butterhead lettuces should be harvested very shortly after the heads have formed. Many lettuce varieties are quick to mature in the summer. You can slow this process by growing them under a shade cloth, which lowers the amount of light on the leaves of the plant. A combination of high temperatures and the long bright days of summer push the plant to become bitter. This crop is best harvested in the early morning or in the evening.



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