

Harvest Clues for Garden Vegetables

Prime quality produce is the goal of every vegetable gardener. The ability to determine when vegetables are ideal for harvest is as important as the skill in growing them.

Vegetables must be harvested at their proper maturity and at peak condition to assure quality, highest flavor and nutrition. Perception of ripeness is a talent acquired through both knowledge and experience and is not only important to gardeners but also to consumers who purchase vegetables.



Leafy vegetables reach their prime condition as vigorous growth of their leaves reaches maximum size, but may be harvested earlier if desired. A bright green color, firmness, tenderness, and crispness are signs of ripe conditions. Dull green to yellow color, wilting or withering, seed stalk development, and toughening of the leaves accompanied by bitter taste are symptoms of poor growth or over-maturity.



Leafy head vegetables should be bright green in color, vigorously growing, tender, and crisp. Ideal cabbage heads should also be firm and compact and noticeably heavy, whereas lettuce heads should be fairly firm yet yield to gentle pressure. Romaine, celery and other stalk or open head types should appear full with good inside (heart) growth. The older, outside (cap) leaves of heads are discarded at harvest.



Flower and bud vegetables including broccoli, cauliflower, artichokes and others should be compact, tender, typical in color and fresh appearing. Edible quality deteriorates as buds lose moisture, become loose, and open and begin to bloom.



Stem or spear vegetables such as asparagus should look fresh, have good color, be firm and tender with closed, compact tips. Open tips and fibrous white bases indicate over-maturity.



Root vegetable quality is generally associated with vigorous healthy top growth. Best quality root vegetables should be fully formed, noticeably heavy, rich in their typical color, and flavorful. Harvest green onions as needed before they begin to bulb, but harvest dry bulb onions after their tops fall over and die back. Some blooming may occur and vines will begin to turn yellow and die back before potato tubers have reached their peak of condition. Harvest carrots, radishes, turnips, beets, and parsnips before seed stocks develop. Over-mature roots become bitter, strong-flavored, fibrous, tough, and sometimes withered.



Fruiting vegetables oftentimes display specific harvest clues. Harvest snap beans just before their pods reach maximum size. They should be tender, snap free of strings, and young beans not quite fully developed. Pick green peas or beans for shelling just before most of the peas or beans reach full size and before the pods toughen.



Sweet Corn - Harvest when slight thumb or fingernail pressure ruptures the kernels to reveal thick, milky internal substance. Silks are generally brown but husks are still moist with a bright, healthy green color.



Tomatoes in prime condition are fully formed, plump, fairly firm, and are of a uniform rich, ripe color for the variety.



Okra pods, when young and tender, cut easily with a knife and are a good green color. The size depends on variety and season of the year.



Eggplant fruit should reach full size, be firm, and have a uniform rich, dark purple color. They should feel waxy and have a sheen. When they look dull they are overripe.



Peppers should be harvested when they are fully developed, firm, crisp, and are the appropriate color. Dried chilies are harvested at full ripeness, are dried and then ground for use.



Squash ripeness clues vary with varieties and type. Generally, summer squash is ready when blossom drops from fruit and when size and color for variety develops. Perfect summer squash skin has a waxy/sticky feel. Ripe winter squash fruits have a noticeable heaviness. Skins of ideally matured summer squash are tender, while the winter squash has hard rinds.



Cucumbers are at their best when fruit is almost fully formed, firm, crisp, and has a rich, bright green color and seeds are small and tender. Over maturity shows yellowing, withering, tough fruit and hardening seeds.



Melon fruits change in appearance and texture as they mature. An obvious yellow blush usually occurs in the rind color of most melons as they ripen, and the overall sheen is noticeably brighter. Softening of the flesh also occurs, starting at the blossom end of the fruit and progressing toward the stem. The blossom ends of fruits are sweeter because ripening begins there.

Muskmelon and cantaloupe ripeness is the easiest of the melons to determine. When ripe, their fruits become noticeably yellow, then become softened at the blossom end, and finally separate from their stems.

Watermelon ripeness is not so obvious. Watch for a cream-to-yellow color showing in the non-green parts of the rinds and a change from dull, dark green to a paler, brighter, shiny green. Browning of vine tendrils and thumping for sound are not reliable indicators of ripeness.

Honeydew melons are ripe when their greenish-white rind changes to a creamy yellow, appears slick and bright, and a slight softening of the fruit develops at the blossom end.

Casaba melons become noticeably yellow and brighten in appearance as they ripen and begin to soften at the blossom end.

Crenshaw melon ripeness is best detected by the density and the color change in the netting (roughened rind surface) of maturing fruits. The net of ripening melons appears more dense and pronounced and the color changes from greenish-gray to gray. The typical softening starting at the blossom end also occurs.

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<http://extension.arizona.edu/yavapai/home-horticulture>

Adapted from Allen D. Boettcher documented dated 1998

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