

When To Harvest Your Vegetables

I'm receiving calls from people wanting to know when vegetables are ready to harvest so I'm providing the following information.

Biggest Is Not Always the Best

Most crops can be harvested several times if only the part that is ready is harvested. The quality of vegetables does not improve after harvest so it is important to gather crops at proper maturity. At this point vegetables are at their peak for flavor and nutrition. This is not always when a vegetable is at its largest stage. The ripe time varies with certain vegetables. Tomatoes may be left on the vine until fully ripened or taken off when partially ripened and placed on a windowsill to mature. Other crops such as winter squash and watermelon are not ready until after they are fully developed.

Handle Plants with Care

Avoid bruising or damaging vegetables as this causes decay. Stepping on vines or breaking stems creates openings through which diseases can enter the plant. If ripe vegetables are not easily removed from the plant, cut them off with a knife.

Tramping through wet foliage helps to spread plant diseases. Harvest vegetables when they are dry.

Check the garden frequently for ripe produce during harvest time. Vegetables continue to grow and before long they are overgrown, especially squash.

Vegetables are harvested at different times so here is some guidance on when to harvest produce from the garden.

- **Beans, Snap** - Harvest when pods are almost full size but before the seeds inside begin to bulge. Tips should be pliable. Beans should be crisp and snap easily. Harvest often.
- **Beans, Lima** - Pick when pods and seeds reach full size and before pods turn yellow. End of pod should feel spongy. Pods and seeds should be fresh, juicy. Open a few pods to check. Use only seeds. Pods are tough and fibrous.
- **Beets** - Beets can be eaten as greens when the leaves are 4 to 6 inches long. When grown for tops and beets, harvest when beets are 1 to 1-1/2 inches in diameter. To use only the beets, wait until they are 1-1/2 to 3 inches in diameter.
- **Broccoli** - Gather when buds are compact and before buds turn yellow or open into flowers. Cut off 6 to 7 inches below flower heads. Small, tender leaves also are nutritious.
- **Brussels Sprouts** - Pick when sprouts (buds) at the base of plant are firm. Don't strip leaves since they are needed for growth. Pinch out growing point at top of plant to get larger sprouts.
- **Cabbage** - Harvest when heads are firm and before mature heads split. Splitting is caused by excessive water uptake. To avoid this, give the head a quarter turn to break several roots.
- **Carrots** - Carrots are ready when 1 inch in diameter. They may be left in the ground for later harvest during cool, dry periods.
- **Cauliflower** - It's ready when head is firm. It's over mature when soft or when leaves turn yellow. When heads are a diameter of 2 to 3 inches, take outer leaves and fold them up and over the head. Tie them with a string. This keeps head from turning yellow. In 1 to 3 weeks diameter of head should be 6 to 7 inches and ready to harvest.
- **Collards** - Harvest older, lower leaves when they reach a length of 8 to 12 inches. New leaves will grow as long as the central growing point remains, providing a continuous harvest. Whole plants may be harvested and cooked if desired.

- **Corn, Sweet** - Kernels are plump, milky when mature. Silks are brown, dry. Check a few ears for maturity by opening the top of the ear and pressing a few kernels with a thumbnail. If the liquid exuded is milky rather than clear, the ear is ready for harvest. Harvest ranges from 18 to 21 days after the silk appears. Corn is at prime eating quality for only 72 hours before becoming over mature. Harvest early in the morning or during cool weather.
- **Cucumbers** - Pick when 6 to 9 inches long and still bright green and firm. Over mature fruits are dull in color or yellow and less crisp. For sweet pickles, fruits should be 1-1/2 to 3 inches long, and for dill pickles, 3 to 6 inches long, and 6 to 8 inches for slicing. Do not raise vines when picking as this may damage the vines and reduce yields.
- **Eggplant** - Harvest when 4 to 6 inches in diameter. Skin should be shiny, dark purple. Fruits are over mature when dull in color, soft and seedy. Cut the fruit from the plant with a short stem.
- **Greens** - Collards, kale, chard, mustard -- Cut outer leaves when 6 to 8 inches long.
- **Lettuce, Head** - Pick when heads are moderately firm and about 6 inches in diameter.
- **Muskmelons (cantaloupe)** - Harvest when the stem slips easily from the fruit with a gentle tug. Another indicator of ripeness is when the netting on the skin becomes rounded and the flesh between the netting turns from a green to a tan color.
- **Okra - Pods** are ready when 3 to 4 inches long, about 4 to 6 days after the flower wilts. Pods stop producing if not picked, so gather them every 1 to 2 days.
- **Onions** - Harvest when tops fall over and begin to die. Dig bulbs and dry for several days. Cut off tops and roots and store in a cool, dry place. Harvest green onions when they are 6 to 8 inches tall.
- **Peas** - Edible, podded cultivars should be harvested when pods are well rounded but before seeds are more than one-half of their full size. Harvest regular peas when the pods are well rounded, seeds are fully developed but still fresh and bright green. Pods are past their prime when they lose their brightness and turn light or yellowish green.
- **Peppers** - Peppers are shiny green in their prime and about the size of a baseball. They still are good after turning red or yellow. Hot peppers are red or yellow when ripe.
- **Potatoes (Irish)** - Harvest the tubers when the plants begin to yellow and die down. Store tubers in a cool, high humidity location with good ventilation. Avoid exposing the tubers to light.
- **Sweet Potatoes** - Sweet potatoes should be harvested before the first frost. Lift to avoid bruises and broken roots. Cure in a warm well-ventilated place for 2 to 3 weeks.
- **Radishes** - Pull them up when they are about 1 inch in diameter. Radishes become hot and tough when left in the garden too long.
- **Rutabagas** - Rutabagas are mature when 4 to 6 inches in diameter. They become woody and dry if soil is too dry.
- **Spinach** - Leaves are ready when 4 to 6 inches long. Pull out larger, whole plants or harvest older leaves to allow new growth.
- **Summer Squash** - Zucchini, cocozelle, crookneck, straightneck, scallop -- Pick when seeds and fruits are small. Squash should be 6 to 8 inches long with skin you can puncture with a fingernail. Continue to harvest.
- **Winter Squash, Pumpkins** - Butternut, buttercup, acorn, hubbard -- Harvest when fruits are full size. Rind should be firm and glossy and bottom of fruit is cream to orange color. Leave squash on stems for better storing and pick before fall frost.

- **Tomatoes** - For canning or juice pick fruits that are fully colored. If cracking at the top is a problem in hot weather, pick them when they are turning pink. These tomatoes will ripen in the shade indoors. Before the frost, pick green tomatoes and store in a dark place where they can ripen.
- **Turnips** - Harvest when roots are 2 to 3 inches in diameter but before the frost. When grown for greens, pick leaves when 4 to 6 inches in length.
- **Watermelons** - Ripe watermelons produce a dull thud rather than a sharp, metallic sound when thumped. Other ripeness indicators are a deep yellow - rather than white-color where the melon touches the ground. Brown tendrils on the stem near the fruit, and a rough, slightly ridged feel to the skin surface.

With the wide range of different varieties these are general indicators. If you plant seeds for vegetables follow the directions on the seed packet for harvesting. Indicators may vary depending on the varieties planted and the color of the produce when ripe. (For example, a yellow tomato should be at its peak yellow color when harvested.)

WVU Organic Research Farm Field Day

Organic Research Farm hosts field day, offers free workshops WVU's Organic Research Farm will host its annual field day from 1:30-7 p.m. on Wednesday, August 5. The farm is situated on 71 acres of land off of Route 705 and Stewartstown Road in Morgantown and houses studies on field crops, livestock, organic pasture management, vegetable production, soil quality and weed, insect and disease management. As part of the farm's mission to provide best-practice recommendations for organic farmers and home gardeners, the field day events will include in-depth workshops, wagon tours of research plots and demonstrations of organic practices. Some new activities this year are demonstrations of organic production methods for biofuel crops such as canola, sunflower, switchgrass and soybean. The field day is free and open to everyone including organic growers, students, who want to learn about alternative food production practices, home gardeners, who want to avoid pesticides, conventional growers, who are considering transitioning to organic, and extension agents or pest-management advisers. The gates will open at 1 p.m. with workshops beginning at 1:30 p.m. Wagon tours begin at 4 p.m., and a dinner sponsored by the WVU Plant and Soil Sciences Club will be served at 6 p.m. Participation in the event is free, but pre-registration is appreciated. For more information or to register, contact Kotcon at 304-293-8822 or jkotcon@wvu.edu. For a schedule of field day events, go to <http://davis.blogs.wvu.edu/blog/2009/7/15/fdsched09>

Orr's Farm Twilight Farm Tour, Saturday, July 25th at 6:15 pm

Hayride tour and picnic dinner made fresh from the farm \$20/person. Learn all about how we produce the fruits and veggies at Orr's. Call 304-263-1168 to RSVP. Only \$20 person...space is limited. Adults only please.

2009 Master Gardener Classes

The West Virginia University Extension Service conducts the Master Gardener program in West Virginia with individual county programs. The training provides gardeners with the opportunity to improve their horticultural knowledge and then share their experience with the public through organized volunteer activities. Topics covered include: botany, soils, pest management, plant problem diagnosis, fruits, vegetables, landscape design and plant propagation. The classes run for 11 consecutive weeks. This year classes will be offered in two locations in the Eastern Panhandle. The fee for materials is \$100. The Berkeley/Jefferson County class will be held on Tuesdays (from 1:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.), beginning September 1, 2009. The Berkeley County Extension Office is located at 400 West Stephen Street, Suite 302, Martinsburg telephone 304-264-1936. If interested in

becoming a Master Gardener, contact the respective Extension Office. For an application for the Berkeley/Jefferson class go to the <http://www.berkeleyextension.com> website under the Agriculture and Gardening section listed as Master Gardener Class Application. Applications will be accepted for the Fall 2009 Berkeley/Jefferson class until noon on Wednesday, July 29, 2009. Due to space limitations, it is possible that not everyone who applies for the 2009 class will be accepted. Please note the Master Gardener Program is not a class for beginning gardeners. Gardening experience is required.

West Virginia Gypsy Moth Suppression Program

The Gypsy Moth Suppression Program is a cooperative regional suppression program between landowners, the County Commissions in the generally infested counties, The West Virginia (WVU) Cooperative Extension Service, WVDA, and the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (USDA-FS). Aerial treatments will be done in the generally infested area on a demand basis only to minimize the damage to forests and reduce the impact of the gypsy moth in future years. Treatments will not be done with the intent of eradicating the pest. Landowners in the 34 participating counties of West Virginia that have had problems with the gypsy moth may sign up for the program any time between now and the end of August at the West Virginia University (WVU) Extension Service county office, or through the WVDA offices at: Charleston (304) 558-2212, Elkins (304/637-0290), New Creek (304)788-1066, or Morgantown (304) 285-3133. The completed applications must be submitted by August 31, 2009. Brochures about the gypsy moth and the 2010 CSCL Program are also available from Extension agents or they can be downloaded from the WVDA website at www.wvagriculture.org. For more information, contact Gary Gibson, Director or S. Clark Haynes, WVDA, Assistant Division Director of the Plant Industries Division in Charleston, at 304-558-2212 or Quentin "Butch" Sayers, WVDA, Gypsy Moth Program Manager, at 304-788-1066. Additional information and assistance may also be obtained through you local WVDA offices located at: Charleston (304) 558-2212, Elkins (304) 637-0290, Morgantown (304) 285-3133, and New Creek (304)788-1066. Or on the WVDA New Creek Web site at <http://wvdanewcreek.home.comcast.net>

Berkeley County Youth Fair Dates and Dates to remember

- 62nd Annual Berkeley County Youth Fair dates are August 2 - 8, 2009
- West Virginia State Fair dates 14-22, 2009. For more information on the WV State Fair go to <http://www.statefairfww.com/>
- Penn State Agricultural Progress Days August 18 - 20, 2009 for more information go to <http://apd.psu.edu/>

Garden Tips

- Harvest summer squash when young and tender
- Plant cauliflower
- Don't let weeds go to seed
- Plant broccoli and Swiss chard
- Seed fall cucumbers
- Water young trees and shrubs during dry periods
- Plant peppers for fall crop

Until next time Happy Gardening and Farming!

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