

Harvest Guide to Summer Veggies



Sweet potatoes are ready to dig when the vines start yellowing at the end of the season. They need a rest period to cure before eating.

Use this harvest guide to recognize when your [beans](#), [tomatoes](#), [squash](#), and other summer vegetables are at the peak of flavor.

Beans



Pick snap beans often to keep them producing as long as possible.

You may pick snap beans when they are very young and serve them as baby snap beans, or you can wait until they reach full size for a more bountiful harvest. Use two hands to pick, because bean stems are easily broken. Don't yank on the pods; hold the stem in one hand and pick with the other. Pick every other day when the beans begin bearing to make sure that they produce to their full potential. Healthy bush bean plants will often rebloom and produce a second and third flush of beans when plants are happy.

Blanching and freezing is the easiest way to preserve a bumper crop of snap beans. Blanch them in boiling water for 1 minute and then quickly cool them in ice water. This process brightens and fixes their color while preserving the crisp texture of the pods.

Cantaloupe and Honeydew Melons



You can smell the sweetness of a cantaloupe through its yellow-ripe rind.

Melons typically ripen over a short period of time. As soon as 1 melon is ripe, the others won't be far behind, usually within 3 to 4 weeks. About a week before a melon is ripe, minimize watering to just enough to keep vines from wilting. This lets vines concentrate sugars in the fruit. Too much water dilutes the sugar and, of course, the sweetness.

You can judge a cantaloupe's ripeness by skin color and stem. The rind of a cantaloupe changes from gray-green to yellow-buff, and the netting pattern becomes more pronounced. At the stem, a crack appears that encircles the base of the stem. A ripe melon should slip right off the vine. Ripe cantaloupes also develop a sweet, musky scent that's noticeable when you sniff the fruit.

The smooth-skinned honeydew melon becomes cream colored when ripe, and the blossom end should give slightly when pressed. Avoid pressing the blossom end repeatedly as you try to gauge ripeness. Excessive pressing can lead to bruising, which gives a false read on ripeness. To harvest a honeydew you don't plan to use immediately, leave about an inch of stem attached to keep the melon from rotting.

Store melons in the refrigerator for up to a week.

Sweet Corn



Dry, brown tassels signal that corn is about ready to pick.

It can be hard to know when an ear of corn is ready to harvest because you can't see inside the husk. Look at the silks. They should be brown and dry with just a little fresh green at the base. Squeeze the husk to see if the ear inside feels plump, not skinny. If the ear seems ripe, check by peeling just enough of the husk back to expose a couple of inches of the ear. Poke a kernel with your fingernail. The corn is ready to pick if it bleeds a light milky sap like skim milk. If the liquid is clear, the ear is not ready. Ears that are too ripe will look too milky, like cream versus skim milk; they often taste starchy.

Perfectly ripened ears also taste sugary-sweet when sampled raw. When possible, harvest sweet corn in the morning, when the ears are cool. To remove the ear, use one hand to hold the corn stalk and the other to pull the ear down and away from the stalk, twisting a little until it breaks off.

Place harvested ears in the refrigerator right away to help preserve the sugars until mealtime. Extra-sweet corn can be blanched and frozen, on or off the cob.

Cucumber



Cut cucumbers from the vine while they are still a nice deep green. Yellowing is a sign of being too ripe and seedy.

You can pick cucumbers whenever they're big enough to use. Check vines daily as the fruit starts to appear because they enlarge quickly. Vines produce more fruit the more you harvest. To remove the fruit, use a knife or clippers, cutting the stem above the fruit. Pulling them may damage the brittle vines.

Don't let the cucumbers get oversized or they will be bitter and will also keep the vine from producing more. Overripe fruit has hard seeds that are difficult to chew. Yellowing at the bottom (blossom end) of a cucumber signals overripe, bitter fruit. Never leave overripe fruit on the vine just because it is too far gone. Remove it.

You can keep harvested cucumbers in the refrigerator for 7 to 10 days, using as soon as possible after picking. If you don't eat a slicing cucumber all at once, cover the unused portion in plastic wrap to prevent dehydration in

the refrigerator. In fact, it's a good idea to wrap your whole cucumbers in plastic or store them in a zipper bag in the fridge. Remember that store bought cucumbers are waxed to keep them from losing moisture. Yours aren't. Keeping them in wrap or a plastic zipper bag will keep them crisp longer.

Eggplant



Eggplants should be glossy and true to color. When their color fades and loses its shine, they are too ripe and may be bitter. These are white and purple types.

Eggplant fruits can taste bitter if picked under ripe or overripe, so harvesting is part of the eggplant grower's art. A perfect fruit will stop growing larger, have a glossy skin, and show a sprinkling of soft, well-formed yet white, immature seeds when you slice it open. Fruits with no visible seeds are immature, and hard, dark seeds are found in overripe eggplant.

Use pruning shears to harvest eggplant with a short stub of stem attached, because the fruits will not pull free by hand. Rinse clean, pat dry, and store in the refrigerator for several days. Eggplant discolors rapidly when cut open, so work quickly when preparing slices or skewers for grilling. Marinades that include salt, vinegar, or lemon juice will keep cut pieces of eggplant from darkening.

Okra



Okra pods can be picked at any young size, but will be like eating cardboard if they get big. Pick every day or two. They grow fast.

Okra is a "cut-and-come-again" vegetable. Keep cutting the pods every day or two, and they will keep on coming.

Warm weather helps pods grow quickly, so check plants every day once they start producing. A pod can grow from nothing to full size in 2 days. Pods first appear at the base of the plant up so that by the end of the season you could be on your tiptoes or a stepladder to harvest.

Pods are ideal when 2 to 4 inches long; they get very tough and stringy if allowed to stay on the plant. Always remove any that are too big to eat because they keep the plant from producing more.

Use pruning shears to cut the pods with a short stub of stem attached. Some people itch from contact with okra's stiff leaf hairs, so you may want to wear gloves and a long-sleeved shirt when gathering your okra.

In warm climates where summer lasts a long time, standard-sized plants can get 6 to 8 feet tall. In this case, many people prune vigorous varieties like Clemson Spineless in late summer by cutting back about one-third of the plants' tops. Buds along the main stem then grow and produce a late crop. You can use similar techniques to rejuvenate dwarf okra varieties like red Little Lucy, which is often combined with herbs and flowers in roomy containers.

Peppers



Peppers don't put pressure on gardeners to harvest immediately. Most will sit on the plant for a while. Harvest when their color and size is true to type. Left on the vine, hot peppers will get hotter.

Use pruning shears or a sharp knife to cut peppers with a short stub of stem attached. Pulling peppers by hand usually causes entire branches to break off. Rinse peppers with water, pat dry, and then store them in your refrigerator.

Pick peppers when they are full size and fully colored. If you aren't sure what that is, check the variety description of what you bought on the tag or on our website. Many hot peppers will turn red, but can be eaten green. Red, yellow, and orange bells start out green and turn color later.

If you don't know what exactly what type of pepper you have, don't fret. Most can be eaten at just about any stage. Fortunately, peppers have a long time window for harvest; they can hang on a plant for several days past maturity. Over ripe bells usually get sweeter. Over ripe hot peppers usually get hotter. You'll figure it out after the first few peppers appear. Peppers, like most other vegetables will produce the most if you pick them often, so don't take advantage of their patience.

Pumpkins



A pumpkin is ripe when it is fully colored, skin is hard, and the stem begins to shrivel and dry.

As pumpkins form, you can slip a piece of cardboard or folded newspaper beneath pumpkins to prevent contact with soil and possible rot, especially if you are growing a precious few. Fruit is ripe when it is fully colored, skin is hard, and the stem begins to shrivel and dry. Pumpkin vines are often prickly, so wear gloves and long sleeves when harvesting to keep from itching. Often, the vines of ripe pumpkins are withering by the time you harvest. To harvest, cut stems with a sharp knife, leaving at least an inch of stem on fruits (more stem is better). Lift pumpkins by slipping your hand under the bottom of the fruit. Never lift a pumpkin by its stem; if the stem breaks, the pumpkin won't store well.

Before storing, set pumpkins in the sun for about 2 weeks to harden the skin, seal the stem, and improve taste. Dry, warm weather is best; protect curing pumpkins from frosty nights with old blankets or by moving them into a shed or garage. Store cured pumpkins in a cool place, arranging them so they don't touch. The ideal storage space has a temperature of 50 degrees with about 60 percent humidity, but since a root cellar is hardly standard in most homes, do the best you can in a basement, vermin-free crawl space, or other frost-free storage. Under ideal conditions your cured pumpkins should store for 2 to 3 months.

Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes are usually ready to harvest just as the ends of the vines begin to turn yellow, or just before frost in the North. To avoid injuring tubers, find the base of the plant you want to dig, and then use a digging fork to loosen an 18-inch wide circle around the plant. Pull up the crown and use your hands to gather your sweet potatoes. To make digging easier and get the vines out of your way, you can cut some of the long vines away before digging. Harvest before frost because cool temperatures can reduce the quality of the potatoes and their ability to keep.

Sweet potatoes are not very sweet when first dug, but they are fine for sweetened pies or casseroles. They need a period to sit and "cure" to bring out their sweetness. Don't wash before curing. Instead, shake off soil, and then lay the unwashed sweet potatoes in a warm (80°F to 90°F), well-ventilated place for about 10 days. A shaded table outdoors and out of the rain works well. As the sweet potatoes cure, any scratches in the skins should heal, and the flesh inside will become even sweeter and more nutritious. This is very important because fresh, uncured potatoes do not bake as well. After 10 days, move your cured tubers to any spot that stays cool and dry, but do not refrigerate or store below 50°F. Cured sweet potatoes will keep for up to 6 months when stored at around 60°F with high humidity; a basement is ideal, and an air-conditioned storage room or pantry will do, too.

Before cooking, rinse and use a vegetable brush to scrub your sweet potatoes clean. Don't wrap in foil when cooking because that causes them to steam. If you bake them without wrapping, they will caramelize better.

Tomatoes



You can pick tomatoes a little green to ripen indoors, but they will have the most flavor when they stay on the plant until fully colored.

The exact signs of ripeness vary with variety, but in general, perfectly ripe tomatoes show deep color yet still feel slightly firm, not hard, when gently squeezed. Sort of like the difference between a hard peach or avocado and one that is just beginning to soften.

As tomatoes begin to ripen, their color changes from vibrant medium-green to a lighter shade, with faint pink or yellow stripes. These “breakers,” or mature green tomatoes, can be chopped into salsas, pickled, or pan-fried into a crispy appetizer. Yet tomato flavors become much more complex as the fruits ripen, so you have good reason to wait. The picture on the stick tag that comes with each Bonnie variety indicates the final, ripe color.

Store picked tomatoes at room temperature indoors, or in a shady place outside. Never refrigerate tomatoes, because temperatures below 55° cause the precious flavor compounds to break down. Bumper crops can be frozen, canned, or dried for future use.

Watermelons



The color of a ripe watermelon is a little dull compared to one still on the vine, and the underbelly where it was lying on the ground will be yellow.

Watermelons typically ripen over 2 weeks. As soon as one melon is ripe, the others won't be far behind. About a week before a melon is ripe, water only as necessary to keep vines from wilting. Withholding water causes sugars to concentrate in the fruit. Too much water reduces sweetness.

You can judge a watermelon's ripeness by its skin color. The rind changes from a bright to a dull green, and the part that touches the soil shifts from greenish white or straw yellow to rich, creamy yellow. Gardeners also judge a watermelon's ripeness by rapping on the skin and listening for a low-pitched thud. Tune your ear to the incorrect sound by rapping on a few fruits that aren't ripe. Under ripe fruits resonate with a high-pitched, tinny sound.

Watermelons will keep 2 to 3 weeks unrefrigerated. Place them in a cool basement to increase their holding time. After cutting, refrigerate unused portions. If you have extra melon on hand, dice or cut the flesh into balls and freeze for slushies.