

When the Time Is Ripe: Harvesting Vegetables for Best Flavor

by Alice Formiga

Beans: Pick string beans when they have grown to size and are crisp but still slender, before the seeds begin to swell in the pods. As the seeds grow larger, the pods become tough and stringy. Pick every other day to encourage the plants to keep producing more beans.

Beets: Pick baby beets at 1-1/2" in diameter and let some grow larger. For best flavor in hot weather, keep beets well watered and don't leave them in the ground so long that they become pithy or woody.

Broccoli: Harvest broccoli in the morning, when the heads are large and fully developed. The buds should be tightly closed; they eventually start to expand and open into yellow flowers, but if you wait until that point, your broccoli will be tough and woody. Cut the plant about halfway down the stalk to encourage the continual production of side shoots.

Carrots: Pull carrots after they've developed a rich orange or yellow color, depending on the variety. If your Carrot tops break off when you pull them, try loosening the soil first with a digging fork. Baby carrots can be picked when they are 1/2" thick. Pick round carrots when they are 1-1 1/2" in diameter.

Chard: Harvest the outer leaves of chard when the plants are sturdy and well established. Be sure to leave 4-6 leaves so that the plant can continue to grow and produce more leaves throughout the summer. Chard will also overwinter in mild areas where the ground does not freeze hard.

Cucumbers: Harvest English and Middle Eastern cucumbers when they've grown to size, the skin is smooth and glossy and the seeds are small. Don't wait too long--bigger is not better in cukes-- and pick at least every other day, since over mature cucumbers become bitter and unpleasantly seedy. Harvest lemon cucumbers when they are light green with just a blush of lemon color—they taste less crisp and much too seedy if you wait until they turn bright yellow.

Eggplant: Pick eggplants when they have grown to size and are smooth and shiny. They taste most delicate and least bitter when they are still young, before the skins toughen and the seeds mature and darken inside. To avoid damaging the easily breakable plants, be sure to cut the fruits from the branches, rather than trying to pull off the eggplants.

Fennel: Cut bulbing fennel at soil level when the bulbing base becomes knobby and rounded and about $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of a tennis ball or larger . After harvesting each bulb, cut the ferny leaves down to the stalk, then slice up the juicy bulb to use fresh or cooked.

Salad and Stir- Fry Greens: Mixed greens such as mesclun salads ,stir fry greens or lettuce mixes can be picked as tiny 2" baby thinnings. Otherwise, use the "Cut and Come Again" method: wait until the young plants are just 4"-7" tall: then cut across the whole bed with a scissors to harvest, leaving the bottom 1"-2" of plants in the soil. Water well, and fertilize lightly. The cut crowns of the plants will regrow for successive harvests. These mixed greens can sometimes taste bitter after several cuttings, particularly in very hot weather, so make successive sowings every few weeks for a constant supply of tender young leaves. Spicier leaves like arugula, taste mildest in cool spring or fall weather.

Kale: You can start picking the outer leaves of kale when the plants are sturdy and well established. Be sure to leave seven or eight leaf crowns to regrow after harvest.

Leeks: Harvest tender baby leeks when they are about $\frac{1}{2}$ -1" thick or continue to let them thicken. Make sure to pick them before they begin to send up a flowering stalk, or else they'll be much too tough to eat. Keep leeks well weeded, watered and fertilized, and hill up the soil around the base for a longer, blanched white shaft, which is more delicate than the tougher green upper leaves.

Lettuce: Pick lettuce in the cool early morning while they leaves are still crisp. Lettuce can be harvested as delicate baby greens, or as crisp, full-bodied heads. To harvest by the "Cut and Come Again, " method, cut with a scissors when lettuces reach about 4-5 inches tall to about 2" above the soil line. Water well and fertilize lightly to enjoy several additional cuttings. Harvest whole heads of lettuce when they start to fill in at the center but before they begin to elongate at the center and "bolt" (send up a flower stem), at which point they'll taste bitter.

Onions: Pick young scallions when they are 10"-12" tall. For large storage onions, wait until about half the tops have started to die back and have fallen over. Knock the remaining tops over and let them stay in the ground for another week. Harvest and store in a cool, dry, airy place. Cut off the tops and shorten the roots when the skin and tops are completely dry.

Peppers: Sweet peppers taste much sweeter and are most nutritious when they've been allowed to fully color up from green to glowing red, orange or yellow on the vine, depending on variety. If your growing season is

too short for peppers to ripen completely, pick your last green peppers as late as possible and keep in a cool place to color up, checking them often for rotting. Chile peppers also develop their full pungency and fruitiness when fully colored, but can be harvested shiny green as soon as they've grown to size.

Summer Squash: Smaller is better when it comes to summer squash. The longer the fruits remain on the vine, the tougher on the outside, seedier and more watery they become on the inside. Even the most ardent zucchini bread bakers will probably not want to grate and freeze too many baseball-bat sized fruits! So pick zucchini no larger than 6" or 7". Pick patty pan squash at 2"-3", round zucchini at 3"-4", and longer trombetta squash at 12"-14".

Winter Squash: Pick winter squash when rind is deeply colored and the shells have become so hard that you can't pierce them with your fingernail. Cut a 2"-3" stem handle, let cure for 10 days in the sun or a very warm room (do not expose to frost) and store in a cool dry place at around 50 degrees. Some varieties which store less well such as acorn squash should be consumed in the fall; the flavor and texture of many other varieties such as Kubocha and Butternut improves in storage.

Spinach: Spinach grows best in cool weather. To harvest by the "Cut and Come Again," method, cut young spinach when it is about 5"-6" tall to about 1" above the soil line and plants will regrow for another cutting. Or you can start harvesting outer leaves as soon as the plants have at least 5-6 full-size leaves, always leaving at least 4-5 leaves on the plant so it can regrow handily. By harvesting frequently with one of these methods, you will extend the period in which the plant produces leaves before it sends up a flower stem and "bolts".

Tomatoes: For best sun-ripened flavor, pick tomatoes when they are richly colored and have no trace of green on the skin. If, however, you are experiencing alternately wet and dry weather and are concerned about cracking of thin-skinned heirlooms, you can pick them when they are just blushed with color and let them ripen indoors (not in the refrigerator). Tomatoes taste best where days and nights are warm—otherwise delicious varieties can taste bland where nights are cool or in years when the sun refuses to shine!

Peas: Pick peas in the morning at least every other day for maximum harvest and crispest texture.

Shelling Peas: Pick them when the pods are rounded and the peas have filled the pod--but before they grow too large and tough.

Snap Peas: Wait until the flat edible pods begin to grow rounded, plump and juicy—but before the peas inside get too big and tough. You'll notice that the pods will not taste sugary enough if the pods are picked too early and flat.

Snow Peas: Pick them when the pods have grown to size but are still quite flat