

## When to Harvest Fruits and Vegetables

Sarah J. Browning, Extension Educator

This NebGuide provides information on the proper ways and times to harvest fruits and vegetables for the best quality and storage.

Harvesting fresh fruits and vegetables brings great satisfaction to home gardeners. To obtain a quality food product from your garden for fresh use or storage, you must harvest fruits and vegetables at their proper stage of development. Improper harvesting influences quality and storage ability as well as continued productivity of the plant. This is a guide to harvesting some of the common fruits and vegetables grown in Nebraska.

Most catalogs and seed packets list the number of days from planting to maturity for vegetable varieties grown from seed. This is only an average number because temperature can significantly influence days to maturity. For example, tomatoes will take longer to mature in late summer when it is cooler than in mid summer when the temperatures are higher.

Remember to harvest at the proper stage, not under-ripe or overripe. Avoid damaging and injuring foliage and vegetables during harvest and when working in the garden. It is sometimes better to cut the fruit or vegetable loose from a plant than to tear it off. Harvest when plant foliage is dry to prevent spreading disease pathogens. Keep fruits and vegetables cool after harvest and use as soon as possible.

Use pesticides safely and follow the label directions for proper pesticide use. Always wash produce before eating, and avoid canning fruits and vegetables with diseased spots.

Some fruits, such as apple, pear, and peach, are harvested based on “ground color,” or the underlying color of the fruit’s skin, disregarding any areas that have reddened due to sun exposure. Ground color changes as immature fruits ripen.

### When to Harvest Fruit

*Apple* — There is no sure method for home gardeners to determine maturity for all cultivars (varieties). If picked prematurely, the fruit is likely to be sour, tough, small, and poorly colored; if picked overripe, it may develop internal breakdown and store poorly.



In red cultivars, observe the portion of the apple that faces the interior of the tree. When the ground color of red cultivars changes from leaf green to yellowish-green or creamy, the apples are ready to harvest. In yellow cultivars, the ground color becomes golden. Mature apples with a yellowish-green background color are suitable for storage. Apples will improve in storage if they are picked when hard but mature, i.e., showing the mature skin color. Most apple cultivars have brown seeds when ready for harvest. However, seeds may become brown several weeks before proper picking maturity. When harvesting, do not remove the stems from apples that will be stored.

*Apricot* — Harvest when fruits are fully colored and begin to soften. Sample fruits to determine the proper time to harvest.

*Aronia* — Harvest by cutting fruit clusters in late August or early September when the violet-black berries are fully colored.

*Cherry, sweet* — Sample fruits to determine the proper time to harvest. Fruits should be fully colored. For fresh eating, the stems should remain attached to the fruits until consumed. Protect fruits from bird damage to ensure a good harvest.

## When to Harvest Vegetables

*Cherry, tart* — The size of the fruit increases until mature. Sample fruits to determine the proper time to harvest. They should be fully colored and flavorful as quality will not improve after harvesting. Protect fruits from bird damage to ensure a good harvest.

*Currant* — Harvest currants for jelly when they are slightly underripe for high pectin content. Pick them fully ripe to use for jams or if they are to be stewed. Fully ripe currants are colored, juicy, and beginning to soften.

*Elderberry* — The fruit should be fully colored and just beginning to soften. Quality does not improve after harvest. Protect fruits from bird damage to ensure a good harvest.

*Gooseberry* — Pick when the berries are firm and a transparent greenish-yellow with darkened seeds. Fruit of some of the newer cultivars often turns a very light to dark red when mature. Overmature fruit is purplish. Quality does not improve after harvest.

*Grape* — Taste grapes to determine peak ripeness. Grapes change color before they are ripe.

*Peach* — Ground color is the best guide for maturity. Harvest when ground color changes from green to full yellow. Red color is not a reliable index of maturity. Taste one or more of the fruits before harvesting to correlate ground color with flavor. Protect fruits from bird damage to ensure a good harvest.

*Pear, European* — Harvest when the ground color changes from a dark green to a yellowish-green, but while the fruits are still too firm to eat. Do not allow the fruits to become fully ripe on the tree. Pears ripen from the inside out and allowing them to become fully ripe on the tree results in development of gritty stone cells. Fruits will be ripe on the outside, but mushy inside. Additional guides to proper harvesting time are when the fruit separates from the twig with an upward twist of the fruit and when the lenticels (spots on fruit surface), which are white or green on immature fruits, become brown.

*Pear, Asian* — Unlike European pears, allow fruits to become fully ripe on the tree. Harvest when fruits can be easily pulled from the branch or spur.

*Plum* — Harvest when the flesh starts to soften. The skin changes color before the fruit is mature.

*Raspberry* — Harvest when the fruit is fully colored and separates easily from the center. Protect fruits from bird damage to ensure a good harvest.

*Serviceberry* — Harvest berries when reddish-purple to blue-purple. Fruits will continue to ripen after harvest. Protect fruits from bird damage to ensure a good harvest.

*Strawberry* — Harvest when fruits are uniformly red and beginning to soften. Harvest with the green leafy cap and stem attached.

*Asparagus* — Lightly harvest the second year after planting; harvest normally in the third year. Harvest when the spears are 6 to 10 inches above the ground but before the heads open. Cut or snap spears off at the soil line. Stop harvesting if spears show a marked decrease in size. Maximum harvest period is 6 to 8 weeks.

*Bean — Dry:* Seeds should be full size and pods should stay on plants until dry and brown. *Lima:* Harvest when pods are fully developed and seeds are green and tender. *Snap:* Harvest before pods are full sized and when seeds are tender and about one-fourth developed. Harvesting usually begins 2 to 3 weeks after first bloom. Don't allow beans to mature on plants or bean production will decrease.

*Beet* — Harvest when roots are 1¼ to 2 inches in diameter. Some cultivars may maintain quality in larger sizes.

*Broccoli* — Harvest when flower head is fully developed, but before the flowers begin to open into bright yellow flowers. Cut 6 to 7 inches below the flower head. Side heads will develop after the main head is cut and also can be harvested as they develop.

*Brussel Sprouts* — Twist or snap sprouts from the main stem when they are hard, compact, deep green, and about 1 to 1½ inches in diameter. The lowest sprouts mature first and plants can be harvested for a month or more.

*Cabbage* — Harvest any time after the head has become firm, but before it splits. Head size will vary based on variety or cultivar, fertility, and spacing. On early cabbage, cut just beneath the solid head. Small lateral heads will develop from buds in the axils of the older leaves.

*Carrot* — Harvest when ¾ to 1 inch in diameter or smaller when thinning. For storage, pull or dig roots when they reach the appropriate size for the cultivar. Leave fall-planted carrots in soil until a light frost occurs. Use care when harvesting since bruising favors the development of soft rot during storage.

*Cauliflower* — Cover heads or “curds” when they are 2 to 3 inches in diameter by tying the outer leaves loosely about the head, or using leaves from other plants in the



garden. Check for developing curds every two to three days, and retie if further development is necessary. Harvest by cutting the heads from the underlying stem when they are full sized, usually 6 inches or more in diameter, but still white and smooth.

*Celeriac* — Reaches best flavor after a frost. Harvest any time the root is 2 inches or more in diameter.

*Celery* — Harvest when plants are 10 to 12 inches tall by cutting the tap root beneath the plant. Overmature plants may contain cracked or pithy stems.

*Chicory* — Harvest for use as greens when leaves are 6 to 8 inches long.

*Chinese Cabbage* — Cut heads off at ground line before a hard frost.

*Cucumber* — Proper harvesting size is determined by product use. *Pickles*: Sweets are 1½ to 2 inches long; dills are 3 to 4 inches long. *Fresh slicing*: Cucumbers are 7 to 9 inches long and a bright dark green. *Burpless*: Harvest when 1 to 1½ inches in diameter and up to 10 inches long. Leave a short piece of stem on each fruit. Harvest daily and don't allow fruit to mature or become yellow.

*Eggplant* — Harvest when fruit is firm and skin is shiny with a uniform color. Fruit size and color should follow cultivar standards. Cut fruits from plant, leaving a short stem section attached.

*Endive* — Blanch inner leaves when plants are 10 inches tall by gathering and tying outer leaves around the inner section. Harvest, when plant reaches a usable size and has been blanched, by cutting below the base of the head.

*Garlic* — Pull bulbs when leaves have dried. Do not knock or bend leaves over prematurely. Allow to dry in a well-ventilated location out of direct sun.

*Horseradish* — Dig roots anytime after a hard frost.

*Jerusalem Artichoke* — Harvest tubers after a hard frost. Tubers can be stored in the ground over winter and harvested early in spring or, with mulch protection, during most of the winter.

*Kale* — Plants may be harvested in two ways. Either cut off the entire plant when leaves reach full size, or periodically harvest the lower leaves. Allow the inner leaves and crown to remain and the plant will continue to produce new foliage.

*Kohlrabi* — Harvest when the thickened stem is 2 to 3 inches in diameter.

*Leek* — Harvest when stems reach ¾ to 1 inch in diameter. Can also be harvested at green onion size.

*Lettuce* — Proper harvesting is based on cultivar types. *Leaf*: Harvest when leaves are a usable size. Remove entire plants, taking the largest first, to thin the row as the season progresses. *Butterhead*: Cut every other plant at ground level when loose heads form. *Crisphead*: Harvest when heads are firm and full.



*Muskmelon/Cantaloupe* — Harvest at full-slip, when fruit will readily separate from the stem.

*New Zealand Spinach* — Harvest by cutting young leaves and tender leaf tips when needed. Plant can be cut back to encourage new growth.

*Okra* — Harvest tender pods when 3 to 5 inches long by cutting them from the plant. Wear gloves because okra is spiny.

*Onion* — Correct harvesting stage is determined by the type and product use. *Green onions*: Thin plantings by harvesting when onions are 6 to 9 inches tall for immediate table use. *Storage onions*: Harvest seed or set grown onions when 50 percent of the tops have dried and the bulbs are 2 or more inches in diameter. Harvest before hard frost.

*Parsnip* — Dig roots after a hard frost or in early spring before new growth starts. To harvest in spring, place 3 to 5 inches of soil mulch over the parsnips. Parsnips are not poisonous anytime during the first growing season or when left in the ground and harvested in early spring.

*Pea* — *Garden peas*: Harvest when pods are fully developed and plump but still green and tender, and before seeds develop fully. *Edible pod*: Harvest when the pods are fully developed, but before seeds are more than one-half full size. *Snap peas*: Harvest as for garden peas.

*Peanut* — Harvest when plants turn yellow at season's end or before the first early frost.

*Pepper* — *Green or sweet*: Harvest when fruits are full sized and firm. Colored cultivars will change from green to red, yellow, or chocolate if allowed to remain on the plant an additional two to three weeks or until they are completely colored. *Hot*: Usually harvested at the red ripe stage, except jalapeno peppers, which are harvested green. Always use caution when harvesting hot peppers to avoid irritation of skin, nose, or eyes.

*Potato* — *New potatoes*: Harvest at any early stage of development, usually 1¼ to 1½ inches in diameter. *Storage potatoes*: Harvest when full sized with firm skins, usually

about two weeks after the vines die down. Tubers continue to grow until the vine dies.

*Pumpkin* — Harvest pumpkins when they are fully colored and the skins have hardened enough to resist the fingernail test. Harvest before a killing frost.

*Radish* — Pull when 1 to 1½ inches in diameter.

*Rhubarb* — Do not harvest the first year after planting; harvest only a few stalks the second year. Established plantings can be harvested for approximately eight weeks. The quality of the stalks decreases toward the end of the harvest period. Harvest only the largest and best stalks by grasping each stalk near the base and pulling slightly to one direction. Note: Freezing temperatures in spring or fall do not make the rhubarb stalks unsafe to eat.

*Rutabaga* — Harvest when the roots are full sized but before a heavy frost.

*Soybean* — Harvest when seed is filled out but still immature and before pods turn yellow.

*Spinach* — Pull plants to thin rows when small. Harvest full-sized outer leaves, but leaving the crown to regrow, during summer. Finally, harvest the entire plant when a seedstalk forms.

*Squash, summer type* — Harvest when fruit is young and tender. Your fingernail should easily penetrate the rind. Long-fruited cultivars, such as zucchini, are harvested when 1½ inches in diameter and 4 to 8 inches long; scallops are taken when 3 to 4 inches long.

*Squash, winter type* — Harvest when mature. The rind should be firm and glossy and not easily punctured by your thumbnail. The portion that contacts the soil is cream to orange when mature. Leave a portion of the vine (2 to 3 inches) attached to the fruit to help prevent storage rot. Harvest squash before a heavy frost.

*Sweet corn* — Harvest when kernels are completely filled and in the milk stage. Use your thumbnail to determine this. The silks are dry and brown at this stage.

*Sweet potato* — Harvest in late fall before the first early frost. Sweet potatoes do not mature or ripen; harvest should be based on root size.

*Swiss Chard* — Small plants can be harvested and used as greens when thinning the rows. Cut large leaves and stems when they are fully expanded, leaving the crown to regrow.

*Tomato* — For peak quality, harvest when fruits are fully colored and firm. At temperatures near 90°F, tomatoes may soften before they are fully ripe. At this time, pick pink tomatoes and finish ripening indoors. Mature green tomatoes, those which have turned a whitish-green color, can be picked before the first killing frost and stored in a cool (55°F), moist (90 percent FH) place. When desired, ripen fruits at 70°F.

*Turnip* — Harvest when roots are 1½ to 3 inches in diameter.

*Watermelon* — Harvest when full sized and the rind in contact with the soil becomes cream to yellow in color.



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