

You know how to grow vegetables, but how well can you tell when your vegetables are ready for harvesting? Harvesting vegetables might seem like a simple task. With tomatoes, it might be easy to tell when fruit is ripe, but for many gardeners, determining the optimal time to harvest produce might be difficult with some vegetables.

If you subscribe to the philosophy of "You just pick 'em when they look right," you might be denying yourself the full benefits of your labors. The goal should be to harvest vegetables when they are at their best — the sweetest, the most tender and the most flavorful. If not picked at the optimum time, a number of vegetables become seedy, stringy, woody and/or tasteless, which nullifies the hard work put into planting and caring for them.

Here are some guidelines for harvesting commonly grown vegetables.

Sweet Corn

Harvesting sweet corn at the right time can be vitally important when it comes to flavor. The first thing to watch for is the start of pollination, which is visually indicated by heavy deposits of pollen on silks and leaves. About three weeks later, the silks will turn brown and the ear will be near optimal maturity. Maturity can be tested by peeling down the husks at this time.

Harvest vegetables for peak flavor



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Gardeners are invited to inspire their senses, especially their taste buds, with a diverse sampling of homegrown tomatoes and peppers at the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office on Saturday.

Pop a kernel 2 inches from the top end of the ear with your fingernail. If the fluid is watery, it is still too early and you should wait one or two more days; if the fluid is milky, the corn is at the right stage for eating. But if it is the consistency of toothpaste, the corn has gone starchy and would be best used as creamed corn or used in chowders. The milky kernel stage only lasts for a few days so do not delay harvesting.

Once ears are picked, they immediately start changing sugars into starches, especially in warm temperatures. Therefore, after picking the cobs, cool them as quickly as possible. If possible, submerge the ears into ice water for several minutes before storing in the refrigerator.

Cucumbers

Proper harvesting size is determined by intended use. Cucumbers should be picked when they are still green and about 2 to 3 inches long for sweet pickles, 4 to 6 inches for dills and 8 inches for slicing. Harvesting on a daily basis during heavy production will encourage continuous production. Do not leave mature fruit on the vine. Cucumbers are past their optimum stage once they turn yellow, form a tough skin and have tough seeds.

Bell Peppers

Bell peppers can be harvested at any size desired. Green bell varieties, however, are usually picked when they are fully grown and mature — usually 3 to 4 inches long, firm and green. If you would like a few red peppers for a nice color



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Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

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contrast in salads, allow some of the fruit to remain on the plant until it turns red.

When the fruits are mature, they break easily from the plant. Less damage is done to the plants, however, if the fruits are cut rather than pulled off.

The new, colored bell pepper fruits can be left on the plant to develop full flavor and ripen fully to red, yellow, orange or brown; or they can be harvested green and immature. Some (including light yellow, lilac and purple) are colors that develop in the immature fruit and should be harvested before actually ripening, when they turn red.

Hot Peppers

Hot peppers are usually harvested at the red-ripe stage, but “green chiles” (the immature fruits) also are required for some recipes. Some dishes might actually call for a specific variety of chile to be authentic.

To dry chiles, individual fruits can be picked and strung in “ristras” or entire plants can be pulled in the fall before the arrival of cold weather and hung in the garage to dry.

Always exercise caution when handling hot varieties, because skin, noses and eyes can become painfully irritated. Plastic or rubber gloves might be helpful when picking or handling hot peppers.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes reach full flavor when uniformly red. Some varieties of tomatoes produce yellow or orange fruit. Tomatoes should be harvested when fully vine-ripened and dark red.

Tomatoes lose their firmness quickly if they are overripe. Overripe fruit might be used for processing into juice, catsup or sauce. One can expect a full red color to develop about five to eight days after the first signs of pink show on the fruit.

