

HARVESTING

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To get the most from your crops, harvest them when they are at the best stage for eating. Vegetables will be crisper and cooler when harvested in the early morning.

Crop	Harvesting Information
Artichoke	Handle buds carefully during harvest to avoid bruising bud leaves. Cut artichokes from their stems about 1 to 1-1/2 inches below the bud base. Use immediately or refrigerate as soon as possible after harvesting.
Arugula (Rocket)	Cut young leaves once they reach 3-inches tall but well before they flower. Young leaves have a milder flavor. Don't pick in full sun to avoid wilting.
Asparagus	Harvest 2 years from planting crowns or roots or 3 years from seedlings. Cut 5 to 8-inch spears just below the soil line; don't damage the crown buds (next year's asparagus). Asparagus should not be washed before storing it in the refrigerator,
Beans	Snap beans should be kept picked (every 3 to 5 days) to keep plants producing heavily. Harvest snap beans when the pods are full-sized. The pods will break easily with a snap when they are ready. Seeds should not cause the pods to bulge. Harvest lima beans when pods are bright green and the seeds are full-sized. The ends of the pod will be spongy. Shelling beans are left on the stem until the bean and pod is completely dry. Dry beans can be placed in a sack; strike sack to break beans from shell.
Beets	Pull the bulb when it is 1 to 3-inches in diameter. Greens can be harvested before the bulbs mature (leave the inner leaves intact). For best taste, harvest greens about 6-inches long. Beets get woody when over-mature. Beets will keep in the ground during frosts.
Bok Choy	Cut outer leaves when heads are 10 to 12-inches tall.
Broccoli	The immature flower heads, parts of the attached small leaves and a considerable portion of the stem (4 to 8 inches) are edible. Harvest before the flower buds open. Smaller side heads will form after the first head is cut.
Broccoli Raab (Rapini)	Harvest plants before buds open, at a height of 10 to 15 inches. Cut the plants at the ground level, or where the stem tissue ceases to be tough and becomes succulent. If you harvest carefully, leaving two leaves intact, they will often re-sprout several times.
Brussels Sprouts	Pick 1 to 2-inch sprouts before leaves yellow. Start with the lower sprouts first. Exposure to frost improves flavor and sweetness.
Cabbage	Harvest when the heads are quite firm and well filled. Some cabbages can be kept reasonably well in the field during cool weather, and they also store well after cutting. When over-mature, cabbage heads may burst.
Cardoon	Harvest stalks in winter and early spring before flowering. Handle carefully—the stalks are spiny.
Carrots	Ready to harvest about 90 days after seeding but continue to grow and enlarge thereafter. Pull when the roots are of good size, but still tender (1 inch in diameter). If necessary, loosen soil first with a digging fork. If carrots are left too long in the soil or allowed to over-mature, the roots become tough, woody and may crack.
Cauliflower	Harvest when the heads are of good size, usually 5 to 6 inches in diameter and still compact. As the heads become over-mature, they tend to segment or spread apart and the surface becomes fuzzy.
Celeriac	Dig when roots are 3 to 5 inches in diameter. Cut off the rootlets and all but 1 inch of foliage. Harvest after first frost to sweeten the root.

Celery	The crop is ready to cut in 90 to 120 days after transplanting when stalk is at least 6 inches from the soil line to the first leaves. Harvest by cutting below the ground through the taproot. If long periods of cool temperatures occur during growth, seed stalk development may occur. Over-mature plants show cracking and pithiness of the petioles.
Chard	Cut outer leaves at ground level when plant is 12 to 18-inches tall. Leave 4 to 6 inner leaves for continued growth. Unharvested outer leaves become stringy and tough.
Chayote	Harvest as soon as fruit is full grown (4 to 6-inches long).
Collard Greens	Harvest outside leaves in the plant's flat rosette to encourage new leaf growth. The younger leaves in the inner rosette can be harvested if sweeter, tender leaves are preferred. A tree-like stem results if leaves are harvested from the bottom up.
Corn, sweet	Ready for harvest about 17 to 24 days after the first silk strands appear, more quickly in hot weather, more slowly in cool weather. Harvest corn when husks are still green, silks are dry brown and kernels are full-sized and yellow or white in color to the tip of the ear. Experienced gardeners can feel the outside of the husk and tell when the cob has filled out. Harvest corn at the "milk stage": use your thumbnail to puncture a kernel—if the liquid is clear, the corn is immature; if it's milky, it's ready; and if there is no sap, you're too late. Pick corn that is to be stored for a day or two in the cool temperatures of early morning to prevent the ears from building up an excess of field heat, which causes a more rapid conversion of sugars to starch. The best time to pick is just before eating the corn.
Cucumbers	Harvest when they are about 2 inches long up to any size before they begin to turn yellow. Remove fruits by turning cucumbers parallel to the vine and giving a quick snap because it prevents vine damage and results in a clean break. Pick ripe fruit to prolong harvest. Harvest lemon cucumbers when they are light green with just a blush of lemon color.
Endive	Harvest the entire plant when hearts are well blanched. Or, harvest outer leaves (like chard).
Eggplant	Pick fruits when they are about 4 to 6 inches in diameter and skins are still glossy. Test for maturity by pressing with the thumb. If the flesh springs back, the fruit is green; if it does not and an indentation remains, the fruit is mature. Harvest when the fruit is about halfway between these stages. Mature fruit should not be left on the plant because they will reduce overall productivity. Use a knife or pruning shears to cut the fruit from the plants.
Fennel, Florence	Use a knife to cut near the soil line when bulbs are 2 inches or larger in diameter. If grown to full size, seed can be collected for culinary use (see "Herbs").
Garlic	Harvest when the plant tops begin to die (when most the leaves turn yellow-brown). Use a garden fork to lift bulbs out of the ground. Pulling plants by hand could crack bulbs and reduce storage life. Let bulbs dry outdoors in the sun for about 3 weeks until the skins become papery. If you only grow a few plants, you can store them by braiding the tops and hanging the rope of garlic in a cool, dry place for use as needed.
Herbs	Harvest fresh leaves in the early morning for maximum flavor. Most herbs can be harvested once the plants start growing vigorously. If harvesting foliage to dry, pick just before flowers open when leaves contain the highest content of aromatic volatile oils; cut individual stems about 6 inches below flower buds. To harvest seed (e.g., dill, coriander, fennel, etc.): when brown or gray seed heads form, place brown paper bag over seed head and tightly secure opening. Periodically shake the bag until a significant amount of loose seed can be heard. Cut the stem below the secured opening.

Kale	Cut lower leaves and work way up stalk (which allows harvesting for an extended period), or whole plant. Frost enhances the flavor.
Kohlrabi	Harvest when bulb is 2 to 3-inches wide. Cut about an inch below the bulb. Larger bulbs may be stringy.
Leek	Harvest when stems are 1/2 to 1-1/2-inches wide and before they make their flower stalk. Size at maturity varies based on variety.
Lettuce	Harvest heading types when they are firm, but not hard. Do not allow heads to become hard; it decreases flavor and other quality characteristics. Bibb lettuce is mature when the leaves begin to cup inward to form a loose head. The heads will never become compact. Cos or Romaine is ready to use when the leaves elongate and overlap to form a fairly tight head about 4 inches wide at the base and 6 to 8-inches tall. Crisphead is mature when leaves overlap to form a head similar to those available in groceries; heads will be compact and firm. Harvest loose-leaf (non-heading) types when they reach full size. Use the older, outer leaves which contain high levels of calcium first. Or, carefully cut the plant above the growing point, to obtain one or more additional harvests.
Melons	Harvest when the fruit is at 'full slip'—when a slight crack completely circles the stem where it is attached to the fruit. If you harvest at the right time, you can pull off the stem, leaving a smooth cavity. However, the slip does not develop in Crenshaw, Casaba or some honeydew varieties. Harvest these melons when the fruit softens at the blossom end and starts to turn yellow.
Mustard Greens	Harvest by cutting or snapping off outer leaves. Excessively large leaves become stringy; small leaves are tender enough to use raw.
Nopales (Prickly Pear Cactus)	Nopales (cactus pads) from robust plants can be harvested up to six times a year during the growing period. Select smaller, young, bright green, firm pads. These are more tender and succulent, and have fewer spines. Carefully cut them from their supporting pads. Harvest when acid content is the lowest—from mid-morning to mid-afternoon. If you are harvesting the “tunas” (fruits that follow flowering) wait until after the colorful spring/early summer blooms give way to the mature fruits before twisting them off the pads. The fruit ripens based on variety (from between early spring through fall) and should be firm but yield to gentle pressure before harvesting.
Okra	Plants grow to a height of 4 to 5 feet and produce pods in about 60 days. After the pods begin to form (2-1/2 to 3-inches long), pick them every 2 to 3 days. The plants stop bearing if you allow the pods to ripen on the stems.
Onions, bulb	Dry/bulb onions are ready to harvest when the tops fall over (approximately 6 months after planting) and the tips start to turn brown. Pull onions and let them dry for a few days on the top of the ground. Cover the bulbs with the tops to prevent sunburn. When the tops and 'necks" are dry, remove the tops and store the bulbs in a cool, dry place. Or you can leave the tops on, braid them, and hang in a cool, dry place. If onions are allowed to form seed stalks, the center of the bulb becomes woody, undesirable to eat and not suitable for long storage.
Onions, bunching (Scallions)	Harvest when green tops are 12 to 18-inches tall. They will overwinter and can be harvested until they set flower.
Parsnips	Harvest when mature (1-1/2 to 2 inches in diameter) and before flowering. Carefully use a digging spade to avoid damaging the 8 to 12-inch root.
Peas	Harvest when the seeds and pods are well-developed, but tender enough so they may be crushed between the fingers without separating into halves. Harvest edible pod types at the first sign of seed development (snow peas: 2 to 3 inches but still flat; snap peas when pods begin to grow rounded and juicy but before they get tough). Pick shelling peas when pods are rounded and they fill the pod, but before

	they grow tough (pods are not edible). The sugar content of peas readily transfers into starch. Peas over-mature quickly and starch conversion continues after picking. Therefore, cook or process soon after shelling. Pick pods regularly to prolong harvest.
Peppers, mild	Harvest fruits when they are green or red-ripe. When allowed to mature on the plant, most varieties turn red and sweeter and increase in vitamin A and C content. Cut, instead of pulling, to avoid breaking branches.
Peppers, hot	Fruit that you plan to dry are allowed to ripen on the plant. Hot peppers turn red when ripe; they may then be cut with 1 inch of stem attached, strung on a thread, and hung in a sunny place until dry and brittle. Use a sharp knife for cutting, as the stems are tough. Cherry peppers are harvested orange to deep red. The cayenne pepper group can be harvested either when green or red, and include varieties such as Anaheim, Cayenne, Serrano and Jalapeno.
Potatoes, sweet	You can harvest when tubers are slightly immature if they are of suitable size; otherwise leave them in the ground until the roots are full grown and the vines begin to turn yellow. However, if the leaves are killed by frost before they yellow, cut them off; dig up the roots; and store them at once in boxes in a warm, moist place. Do not bruise the roots when digging, as this increases the possibility of decay. Sweet potatoes improve during storage because a part of the starch content turns to sugar.
Potatoes, white	Small tubers can be harvested from growing plants if care is taken not to disturb the roots and remaining tubers. However, most of the crop should be harvested when vines die and/or the skin of the tubers is firm, not flaky. Remove vines before digging. Potatoes can be left in the ground until needed if frost or heavy rains are not a concern (but avoid exposing tubers to light or ground cracks). Do not wash potatoes before storing; brush off dirt.
Radishes	Harvest as early as three weeks from sowing. Pull when 1 to 2 inches in diameter. Woody when over-mature.
Rhubarb	Harvest 1 year from planting roots; 3 years from sowing seed. Either pull or cut the petioles from the crown (only the stalks are edible).
Rutabagas	Harvest using a digging fork when roots are 2 to 3 inches in diameter and before freezing conditions occur.
Shallots	Pull when they bulb out in the late spring and the tops yellow and begin to fall over.
Spinach	Spinach is fast growing and short-lived and matures its leafy foliage in 7 weeks. When ready to harvest, you can either cut the entire plant or just remove the outer leaves. If you carefully cut the plant above the growing point, you can obtain a second crop.
Squash blossoms	Male flowers (stem is thin) can be eaten. There are always many more male flowers than female. Harvest only the male blossoms unless the goal is to reduce production. Always leave a few male blossoms on the vine for pollination purposes. Use pruning shears or a sharp knife to cut squash blossoms at midday when the petals are open, leaving one inch of stem. Gently rinse in a pan of cool water and store in ice water in the refrigerator until ready to use. The flowers can be stored for up to 1 or 2 days.
Squash, summer	Best when small and tender. Skins should be tender enough to poke a fingernail through. Zucchini types are harvested when immature, about 6 to 8 inches long and 1-1/2 to 2 inches in diameter; patty-pan types, when 3 to 4 inches in diameter; yellow crookneck, when 4 to 7 inches long. If the squash rind is too hard to be marked by a thumbnail, it is too old. Remove old fruit to allow new fruit to develop. Check plants daily once they begin to bear.

Squash, winter (and pumpkins)	Harvest before frost when full sized and well formed with the stem intact. They should be well matured with good rind development typical of the cultivar. Most, but not all, squash is ready when the rind is hard enough to resist fingernail scratches and the plant materials dies back. The stem often is better indicator of ripeness—look for woody, brown stripped stems (aka “corking”) where it joins the fruit. Immature fruit have a fleshy stem. Cut the stem 2 to 4 inches from the fruit (for better storage). Exception: Hubbard-type squash store best with the stem completely removed. Leave pumpkins in the sun for a week or two to cure.
Tomatillos	Harvest when the fruit fills the husk (1 to 2-inches wide). Green (less mature) fruit contain more acid and are less sweet than fully mature yellow-green fruit (preferred).
Tomato	For best flavor, harvest when fruit are at full color for the variety. Store ripe fruit at 55-70 degrees to maintain fresh, ripe flavor. At the end of the season, pick immature fruit and store at 70 degrees to ripen. Immature fruit can be placed in a shaded area to further ripen them.
Turnips	Start harvesting when bulbs are 2 to 3-inches in diameter. Greens can be harvested before the bulbs mature (leave the inner leaves intact). Over-mature bulbs become woody.
Watermelon	To test for ripeness, rap the side of the fruit with your knuckles. A light or metallic sound means that the fruit is still green; a dull sound means it is ripe. This is most reliable in the early morning. During the heat of the day or after melons have been picked for some time, they all sound ripe. Fruits have a "ground spot" where they rest on the ground; this spot turns slightly yellow as the fruit matures. Watermelons tend to become rough as they mature. The tendrils closest to the fruit darken and dry up as the fruit ripens. Do not pull melons off the vine; use a sharp knife for cutting.

Sources:

- *California Master Gardener Handbook*, 2nd Edition, editor Dennis R. Pittenger
- [Year-Round Food Gardening in Sonoma County](#), Food Gardening Specialists, UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County
- [Vegetable Planting Summary](#), Food Gardening Specialists, UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County
- [Crop articles](#) on the UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County website

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