

## Harvesting vegetables from the home garden

Helen C. Harrison



**T**o ensure high quality, nutritious vegetables from your garden and to prevent waste, proper harvesting at the right stage of growth is essential. Harvest the vegetables listed below when they exhibit the characteristics listed after each.

**ASPARAGUS** When the spears are 6 to 8 inches tall, the diameter of your index finger, and before the tips start to open. Cut or break off the stems at the soil line. Don't harvest skinny spears.

**BEANS, SNAP** When the pods are almost full size but before seeds begin to bulge.

**BEANS (broad, greenschell, lima)** When pods and seeds reach full size but are still fresh and juicy. Only use seeds because the pods are tough and fibrous.

**BEETS** As greens, when the leaves are 4 to 6 inches long; as tops and small beets, when beets are 1 to 1½ inches in diameter; as roots only, when roots are 1½ to 3 inches in diameter.

**BROCCOLI** When flower heads are fully developed but before individual flower buds start to open. Cut off 6 to 7 inches below flower heads; do not discard small, tender leaves because they are very nutritious.

**BRUSSELS SPROUTS** When sprouts (buds) at base of plant become solid. Remove buds higher on the plant as they become firm, but do not strip the leaves because plants need them for further growth. To help ensure maturity of

existing buds, you can top up to ¼ of the plant later in the season.

**CABBAGE** When heads become solid. Excessive water pressure causes splitting of solid heads. To avoid splitting solid heads that you don't want to harvest immediately, pull plants upward enough to break a few roots. This reduces the inflow of water from the soil. Leave older leaves, stems and roots of several plants to produce small, lateral heads later in the season.

**CARROTS** When roots are ¾ to 1 inch or more in diameter. If you want to store them, pull them just before heavy frosts in late fall.

**CAULIFLOWER** When curds (aborted flower heads) are 6 to 8 inches, but still compact, white, and smooth. Curds exposed to sunlight become cream colored, rough in appearance, and coarse in texture. Therefore, when curds are 3 to 4 inches across, exclude sunlight by covering with an inverted cabbage leaf which may need to be replaced once or twice. Or you can tie the tips of the outer cauliflower leaves loosely above the curd.

**CELERIAC** When the thickened stem and root portion reaches 2½ to 3½ inches in diameter. If you want to store celeriac, leave it in the garden until just before the first fall frost.

**CELERY** When the plants become 12 to 15 inches tall. While young and tender, the lower leaves (8 to 10 inches long) may be removed from a few plants and used in salads, soups, and cooked dishes. If you

want to store the plants with roots attached, leave them in the garden until the first fall frost.

**CHARD** When plants become 6 to 8 inches tall, thin 4 to 6 inches between plants and use the small plants in cooking. Thereafter, remove only the outer, older leaves when they are 8 to 10 inches long but still young and tender. New leaves will continue to grow from the center of each plant for a continuous harvest of young, tender chard.

**CHINESE CABBAGE** Cut entire head off at ground line before the first hard freeze.

**CHIVES** Break off new leaves at ground level as they appear in early spring. Use young, tender leaves throughout the season.

**SELECTED HERBS**

HERB	PART USED	HARVEST
Anise	seed	when ripe
Basil	leaves	as needed
Borage	flowers	as needed
Caraway	seed	slightly unripe
Cardamom	seed	slightly unripe
Catnip	leaves	as needed
Chervil	leaves	as needed
Cilantro	leaves	as needed
Comfrey	leaves	as needed
Coriander	seed	when ripe
Fennel	seed	when ripe
	leaves	as needed
Ginger	rhizome	when mature
Ginseng	root	when mature
Horehound	leaves	before bloom
Lemon balm	leaves	as needed
Lovage	leaves	as needed
Marjoram	leaves	as needed
Mint	leaves	as needed
Oregano	leaves	dry leaves
Parsley	leaves	as needed
Rosemary	leaves	as needed
Sage	leaves	as needed
Savory	leaves	as needed
Tarragon	leaves	as needed
Thyme	leaves/ cuttings	as needed

**COLLARDS** Break off outer leaves when they are 8 to 10 inches long. New growth from the center of each plant provides a continuous harvest of young, tender leaves.

**COWPEAS OR BLACK-EYED PEAS** When seeds are near full size, but still bright green; as mature or dry seeds, when seeds are full size and dry. Dry seeds are used for cooking, baking, and in soups.

**CUCUMBERS** For sweet pickles, when fruits are 1½ to 2½ inches long; for dills, when fruits are 3 to 4 inches long; for slicing, when fruits are 6 to 9 inches, bright green, and firm. Older cucumbers are dull in color, less crisp, may have objectionable seeds and may produce lower yields. Harvest burpless cucumbers when they are 10 to 12 inches long.

**DILL** Use dried or freshly chopped leaves. For dill pickles, cut fruiting top with several inches of stem when fruit is fully developed but not yet brown. Use either fresh or dried.

**EGGPLANT** When fruits are about 4 to 6 inches in diameter but still firm and bright in color. Older fruits become dull in color, soft and seedy.

**ENDIVE** When plant is 10 to 12 inches across and after you blanch the center leaves by covering or tying loosely to exclude light for 2 to 3 weeks.

**GARDEN CRESS** When leaves are 3 to 5 inches long. You can sow again in late summer, about August 10, for fall harvest.

**GARDEN HUCKLEBERRY** When fruits are fully ripe and black.

**GARLIC** Pull just before the first fall frost.

**GOURDS** Edible cultivars, when fruits are 8 to 10 inches long, young

and tender; ornamental cultivars, when fruits are mature and fully colored but before first fall frost.

**HORSERADISH** Dig roots in late fall or early the following spring.

**JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE** Dig tubers after early fall frosts or very early spring before new growth starts.

**KALE** Break off outer leaves as they become 8 to 10 inches long. New leaves will grow from the center of each plant for a continuous harvest.

**KOHLRABI** When “bulbs” (thickened stems) reach 2 to 4 inches in diameter, depending on cultivar. The heirloom variety Giganta reaches about 10 pounds and 8 inches in diameter without becoming woody.

**LEEKs** When 1 to 1½ inches in diameter but before fall frosts.

**LENTILs** When pods turn yellow. Mature seeds are used in soups.

**LETTUCE** Leaf cultivars, when outer, older leaves are 4 to 6 inches long; heading cultivars, when heads are moderately firm and before seed stalks start. Older, outer leaves may be taken from plants of either leaf or head lettuce as soon as the leaves are 4 to 6 inches long. New leaves provide a continuous harvest of tender, tasty lettuce until hot weather brings on bitter flavor and seed stalks start.

**MUSHROOMs** Cultivated, when mushroom (fruiting body of fungus) is 1 to 2 inches across but before cap separates from stem.

**MUSKMELON** When base of fruit stem starts to separate from fruit. Fruit will be almost ripe when separation starts and fully ripe when a crack appears completely around the base of the fruit stem.

---

**MUSTARD** Harvest outer leaves when 8 to 10 inches long. New leaves provide continuous harvest until flavor becomes strong and leaves become tough in texture from hot weather. Seed again in late summer, about August 1, for milder flavor and tender texture.

**OKRA** When young and tender pods (fruits) are 3 to 4 inches long but still bright green (or purple for some cultivars).

**ONIONS** From sets for green onions, harvest when 6 to 8 inches tall. Harvest any with round, hollow seed stalks as soon as these stalks appear. Continue harvesting larger plants until all are used. Mature onions from sets do not store well. If planted from seeds or plants (Sweet Spanish cultivars), harvest when tops fall over and begin to dry. Pull with tops on and dry them in a protected place, cutting tops 1 inch above bulb for further drying. Sweet Spanish onions may not keep as well as the more pungent-type storage cultivars grown from seeds sown directly in the garden.

**PARSLEY** When outer leaves are 3 to 4 inches long. Continue to remove outer leaves while they are still young and tender throughout the summer and until heavy frosts in late fall. Start a new plant from seeds sown in a pot outdoors about August 1 for harvesting indoors during winter.

**PARSNIPS** In very late fall, after early frosts, and in very early spring before growth starts. If the roots are to be left in the soil over winter, cover after early frosts with 3 to 5 inches of soil to avoid injury from alternate freezing and thawing. The garden parsnip is not poisonous in any season.

**PEAS** Regular cultivars, when pods are fully developed but still bright green. Harvest edible-pod cultivars (snow, Chinese), when pods reach near full size (about 3 inches) and before seeds show appreciable enlargement. If you want to only eat the seeds, harvest when seeds are fully developed but pods are still fresh and bright green. Other edible-pod cultivars (Sugar Snap and Sugar Ann) have high sugar content and pods with fairly thick walls. Harvest these when the pods are filled out.

**PEANUTS** When fruits (seeds in shells) are fully developed, just before first fall frost. To harvest, lift plants with fruits attached and allow to dry for several days.

**PEPPERS** When fruits are firm, good size and appropriate color. In 2 to 3 weeks “mature-green” peppers will be fully ripe (green will change to red).

**POTATOES** When tubers are full size and the skin is firm. “New” potatoes may be harvested at any size, but generally are dug after the tubers are 1¼ to 1½ inches in diameter.

**PUMPKINS** When fruits are full size, the rind is firm and glossy, and the portion of the fruit touching the soil is cream to orange.

**RADICCHIO (RED CHICORY)** In the fall, after the first frost, for best flavor. The burgundy red-colored leaves with white midribs should be folded to resemble a small, loose head of cabbage.

**RADISHES** When 1 to 1½ inches in diameter.

**RHUBARB** When stalks (leaf petioles) are 8 to 15 inches long. Flavor and tenderness are best in spring and early summer. Light harvesting from vigorous, well-established plants may be continued through-

out the season, and you may pull all leaves present just before the first fall frost.

**SALSIFY** In late fall, preferably after early frost, or in early spring before new growth starts. If you leave the roots in the soil over winter, cover after early frosts with 3 to 5 inches of soil to avoid injury from alternate freezing and thawing.

**SPINACH** When larger leaves are 6 to 8 inches long. Pull larger, whole plants from the row until you harvest all plants. Spinach planted in early spring goes to seed when the days get longer; spinach planted about August 1 does not go to seed during the shorter days of fall.

**SQUASH** Winter squash, when fruits are full size, the rind is firm and glossy, and the portion of the fruit touching the soil is cream to orange. Harvest summer squash when fruits are 6 to 10 inches long for long-fruited cultivars, and 3 to 6 inches in diameter for flat, scalloped cultivars.

**SWEET CORN** When kernels are fully rounded but still filled with milky juice. Harvest about 21 days after silk appears. To make the soil easier to work the following year, pull each stalk out of the ground when you harvest the last ear; chop and place in compost pile or discard.

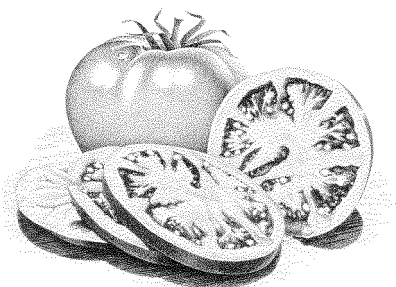
**SWEET POTATOES** Late in the fall but before the first early frost. Dig carefully to avoid cuts, bruises and broken roots. Use smaller, younger roots soon after harvest; sweet potatoes do not store well when grown in Wisconsin’s comparatively cool, short seasons.

**TOMATOES** When fruits are fully colored. For fully ripe tomatoes, leave completely red fruits on

healthy plants for 5 to 8 days during the warm, sunny days of August and very early September. Pick only fully ripe tomatoes for juice or canning to ensure full flavor, good color, and maximum sugar content. Fruits will ripen indoors if picked at a mature green stage or when some color is showing.

**TURNIPS** When roots are 2 to 2½ inches in diameter but before heavy fall frosts.

**VEGETABLE SOYBEANS** For fresh green salads, pick when pods are thick but still bright green. For easy shelling, heat pods in boiling water until color darkens. Only use the seeds, because the pods are tough and fibrous. For mature, dry seeds, harvest when pods are dry but before pods begin to open. Use for cooking, baking, bread, and sprouts.



**WATERCRESS** Pick tips of stems 6 to 8 inches long, especially in spring and fall. This is when leaves and stems are fully developed but still bright green and tender.

**WATERMELON** When fruits are full size, dull in color and the portion touching the soil turns from greenish white to cream. The tendrils nearest a melon curl and dry up when a melon is ripe.

**WITLOOF (BELGIAN ENDIVE)** Pull roots after first fall frost. Cut tops to 1 inch and reset roots in soil or other moisture-holding material in a dark, cool (60° to 65°F) location. Cover tops of roots to a depth of 4 to 6 inches. Harvest underground, compact, white leaf bases as they grow from the top of each root.

## ADDITIONAL TIPS for harvesting and storing vegetables

The time of day when you harvest vegetables from your garden can influence their quality. Harvest all leafy vegetables, including herbs, in early morning, when they still glisten with dew.

Harvest the following vegetables as close to preparation and meal time as you can: asparagus; snap, broad, greenshell, and lima beans; all root vegetables; broccoli; brussels sprouts; cabbage; cauliflower; cucumbers; eggplant; kohlrabi; leeks; okra; peas; peppers; summer squash; sweet corn; tomatoes; fresh vegetable soybeans; and cowpeas.

Handle fresh vegetables carefully so that you don't cut, break or bruise them. To prevent water loss and wilting after harvesting, store them in plastic bags or covered containers in the refrigerator or a cool place.

If you are planning to freeze or can your garden produce, harvest it just before preparing it for preservation. You will have a high-quality finished product if you use very fresh vegetables.



**Copyright © 2001** University of Wisconsin-System Board of Regents and University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension.

**Author:** Helen C. Harrison is professor of horticulture, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension. Produced by Cooperative Extension Publishing, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

**University of Wisconsin-Extension,** Cooperative Extension, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin counties, publishes this information to further the purpose of the May 8 and June 30, 1914 Acts of Congress; and provides equal opportunities and affirmative action in employment and programming. If you need this information in an alternative format, contact Cooperative Extension Publishing at 608-262-2655 or the UWEX Affirmative Action Office.

**This publication is available** from your Wisconsin county Extension office or from Cooperative Extension Publishing. To order, call toll free 877-WIS-PUBS (947-7827) or visit our web site at [cecommerce.uwex.edu](http://cecommerce.uwex.edu).