

## Enjoying your First Garden Produce

### Harvesting your Produce

There is no specific time of the year when you should begin harvesting your produce as fruit and vegetables become ripe and ready to harvest at different times of the year. Climate, variety and also the particular season are other factors that have an impact. It is worth noting that the quality of fruit and vegetables does not improve after harvest in most cases, although tomatoes can be picked before they are fully ripened and left to ripen indoors. If you pick things too soon, they are likely to be too tender and this will impair the flavour. However, if you leave it too late, not only will this affect the taste but the produce may become mushy or tough.



A September Garden Harvest

### Time of Day to Harvest

In general, try to harvest during the coolest part of the day – either early morning or late afternoon. Harvest when crops are dry. If you're harvesting a vegetable for fresh eating, pick it just before meal time as this preserves its flavour and nutrients. The sugars in the vegetable start turning to starch within minutes of harvesting. Pick an ear of corn and pop it straight into the cooking pot, for example, for optimum sweetness. If you're harvesting a vegetable for preserving, harvest it as soon before processing as possible.

### Pick Early and Often

Many vegetables should be picked young, when they're at their sweetest. As vegetables mature, their sugar turns to starch. Root crops can become bitter and woody if grown too large. Check days to maturity and expected root size of each variety to gauge the best time to pick root vegetables.

With many vegetables, the more you pick, the more they'll produce. Fruiting vegetables such as cucumbers contain the seeds for the next generation. As soon as there are enough mature seeds, the plant gets the signal to stop producing fruit. If you keep picking the fruit while its seeds are still immature, the plant is tricked into thinking it needs to keep producing more fruit to propagate itself.

### Don't Let Them Bolt

When the heat of summer hits, the natural tendency of cool-weather crops such as flowering brassicas and leafy greens is to reproduce and go to seed, or "bolt". Pick these vegetables before they bolt, as when they do, they can taste bitter.

## Summarised A – Z of harvesting

There are differences between different varieties, meaning that a general rule of thumb may be a good starting point, but it will be useful for you to consult gardening books, online references, and of course the information on the seed packets of seeds to see any specifics for the varieties that you have grown.

- **Asparagus:**

Begin harvesting when spears are 6-8 inches tall and about as thick as your small finger. Snap them off at ground level and new spears will continue to grow. Stop harvesting about 4-6 weeks after the initial harvest, to allow the plants to produce foliage and food for themselves.

- **Aubergine:**

Slightly immature fruits taste best. The fruits should be firm and shiny. Cut rather than pulling from the plant.

- **Beans (green):**

Pick before you can see the seeds bulging. They should snap easily into two. Check daily as it doesn't take long for beans to go from tender to tough

- **Beetroots:**

You can harvest and eat the green tops that you thin out of the rows. Beetroots are really a matter of personal preference when it comes to the right size for harvesting. They are ready any time after you see the beetroots shoulders protruding at the soil line. Remember you can eat the leaves of any thinnings you take out.

- **Broccoli:**

We eat the unopened flower buds of broccoli, so check frequently, especially as the weather warms up, to ensure you don't let the flower heads bloom. It may not reach the size of head that you can get in the supermarket. Harvest when the buds are about the size of a match head.

- **Brussels Sprouts:**

The sprouts will mature from the bottom up. You can begin harvesting once the sprouts are at least an inch in diameter. Harvest by twisting off or cutting the sprout from the stem. Sprouts come in both early and late varieties so there's the possibility that you may start picking in September right through until March.

- **Cabbage:**

The cabbage head will feel solid when gently squeezed. Cabbage needs to be harvested when it reaches maturity or it will continue to grow and split open.

- **Carrots:**

Do not be fooled by the tops which can be quite bushy but the carrots themselves are quite small. Gage size of the of the carrot top in the soil, looking for when the diameter looks right for your variety. If the diameter looks good, chances are the length is fine too. But you will need to pull one to be certain. Carrots can be left in the ground once mature. A light frost is said to improve and sweeten the carrot's flavour. When harvesting, drench the bed with water first, making the carrots easier to pull.



Freshly harvested carrots

**Cauliflower:**

As with broccoli, your home grown cauliflower heads will probably never match supermarket size. Harvest when the head looks full and while the curds of the head are still smooth.

- **Corn:**

About 3 weeks after the silks form, they will turn dry and brown. The kernels should exude a milky substance when pricked.

- **Cucumber:**

Cucumbers race to the harvest with courgette. Check daily and harvest them young. Timing and length will vary with variety. The fruits should be firm smooth. Over ripe cucumbers can be very bitter or pithy, even before they start to turn yellow.

- **Onions:**

Onions can be dug once the tops have ripened and fallen over. Allow the onions to dry in the sun. Bolting is a very common problem with onions. Bolting is when the onion suddenly puts up a central stalk that develops a seed head. Once started the only thing to do is to cut the stalk off an inch or two above the bulb. Use these first as they will not store well.

- **Parsnips:**

Parsnips taste best if they are left in the ground until after a frost or two. They can be left in the ground over the winter and harvested in the spring. In cold areas, they should be mulched for the winter. When the foliage on a parsnip starts to die, it's ready to pick.

- **Peas:**

The pea pods should look and feel full. Peas are ready when the pod is well filled but there is still a little bit of space between each pea. Peas are sweeter if harvested before fully plumped. Peas really need to be tasted to determine if they are sweet enough.

- **Potatoes:**

'New' potatoes can be harvested when the tops start to flower. Carefully dig at the outer edges of the row. For full size potatoes, wait until the tops of the potato plants dry and turn brown. Start digging from the outside perimeter and move in cautiously to avoid slicing into potatoes.

- **Pumpkins:**

Once the pumpkins have turned the expected colour and the vines are starting to decline, they can be cut from their vines. Don't leave them out if a hard frost is expected.

- **Radishes:**

Radishes mature quickly. You will see the shoulders of the bulbs popping out of the soil line. If left too long, they will become tough and eventually go to seed.

- **Spinach:**

Spinach goes to seed quickly. Harvest by cutting at the soil line before you see a flower stalk beginning to shoot up.

- **Tomatoes:**

Harvest tomatoes when they are fully coloured and slightly soft to the touch. Gently twist and pull from the vine.

- **Turnips:**

The turnip shoulders should be about 2 inches in diameter at the soil line, when ready. Overripe turnips become woody.

## Harvesting Herbs

Harvesting your crop is one of the most satisfying things about growing herbs.

Taking a bunch of freshly harvested herbs to use for cooking in the kitchen is a real joy. However it's important that, when picking your herbs you do not hamper further growth of the plant by picking too many leaves and preventing the plant from being able to function properly.

Each herb you pick and how you pick it will depend on what you want to use it

for. If you just want a few leaves to add to a salad or a sauce you should just pinch each leaf off with your fingers, rather than take the whole stem. This will leave sufficient leaves in place for the plant to continue photosynthesising (making and providing food for the plant so it can produce more tasty leaves). However, if it is the end of the season and you want to harvest the whole plant to preserve for winter use (such as to make pesto out of basil), cutting the plant at the base of the stems or digging it up completely is recommended.



Chives, mint and chamomile

## Tips for Picking Herbs

The time of day and time of season can affect the quantity of oil present in the leaves of your herbs. The oil present in the leaves can determine the flavour intensity of the herb and its nutritional content or medicinal value. Therefore, to achieve the maximum flavour of the herb, follow these simple tips:

- Harvest your herbs on a dry day, in the late morning after the dew has evaporated.
- Harvest your herbs before the plants flower (the energy it takes to produce the flowers can reduce the oil content in the leaves and the existence of flowers can slow or stop the further production of leaves).
- Remove any flower heads from the plant to ensure it keeps producing as many leaves as possible.
- Harvest your herbs on the same day you intend to use them, preferably just a couple of hours beforehand. This preserves their freshness.

It is also important to ensure that your herbs are in tiptop condition before you harvest them. If you pick the leaves off before the plant has had time to establish, it could damage the plant and hamper its growth. The following tips will help you maintain healthy plants that will lead to bigger yields in the long term:

- Make sure your herbs have time to develop into healthy, robust plants before you pick the leaves off them.
- Never cut more than a third of the plant in one go and give the plants time to grow back before you harvest them again.
- Pinch the leaves off with your fingers or use sharp scissors. Always ensure the cut is clean and never cut the leaves.
- When harvesting plants for their flowers, (such as lavender), cut them just before they start to wither.
- Annual herbs, such as basil and coriander, should be 'pinched back' when harvested. This means you should only take leaves from the growing tips of the plants. This ensures that the plant will produce more leaves, produce fewer flowers and will lengthen the life of the plant.
- When picking chives, always cut leaves at the base of the plant. This will encourage new growth.

Harvesting herbs is easy and rewarding. Once harvested, rinse them in cold water and use as quickly as possible. This will ensure they retain all of their flavour and colour.

### **References**

- <http://www.herbexpert.co.uk/PickingHerbs.html>
- <http://www.safegardening.co.uk/PreparingStoringFruitVegetables.html>
- <http://www.vegetableexpert.co.uk/ManagingTheHarvest.html>
- <http://www.omygarden.net>