



*When to Harvest Warm-Season  
Vegetables in the*

# EDIBLE GARDEN

Ag *for* Life





# When to Harvest Warm-Season Vegetables in the Edible Garden

Warm-season vegetables require warm soils and ambient temperatures to germinate, grow and produce fruit. They cannot tolerate consistently cool temperatures. Plants in this category include beans, corn, peppers, tomatoes and winter and summer squash, as well as pumpkins. Here are a few tips to determine when it is harvest time for a few common warm-season vegetables.





# TOMATOES



Tomato plants are usually harvested in mid-to-late summer. Tomato fruit come in many colours: red, pink, yellow, orange, purple, and even black. You actually don't have to wait for a tomato fruit to reach its full colour on the vine – you can pick the fruit when it is green and just showing a hint of colour, and then ripen it in your kitchen. (If it is too green, it will not ripen, so don't pick the fruit too early). This is a great safety measure, as some tomatoes have a tendency to split if they are left on the vines to ripen; as well, it means you don't have to panic if you have a lot of green tomatoes on your plants and a heavy frost is in the forecast.

When picking tomatoes, be careful not to break the stems of the plant. To prevent this from happening, hold the fruit with one hand and the stem with the other hand, while gently pulling the fruit away from the stem.

If you are picking green tomatoes, store them in a brown paper bag or wrap them in newspaper and lay them in a shallow box with no lid. Keep them in a room at a consistent temperature of 21°C (69.8°F) for up to one month. The ethylene gas produced by mature green tomatoes will help the ripening process. Tomatoes do not need light to ripen indoors. Warmth, however, is necessary.

If you have a massive amount of tomatoes, preserve them by canning, freezing, or dehydration. Keep a few out on the counter to eat fresh within one week. Do not store tomatoes in the refrigerator as it degrades their quality. Wash them before you eat them. Remember, if your tomatoes are picked too early and they fail to ripen, you can always use them in recipes that call for green tomatoes.



# PEPPERS



Peppers are usually harvested when the fruit reaches the mature colour that is appropriate for the particular variety they are – that may be red, orange, green, or yellow. (Some, such as bell peppers, may be picked and enjoyed before they reach their mature colour). You can also choose to harvest peppers when they reach either their mature size, or even smaller. The benefit of waiting to harvest is all about the flavour. Sweet peppers will have a more pronounced sweet taste while the flavour of hot ones will increase in heat even more.

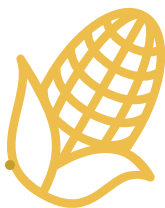
Be sure to harvest all of the fruit before it becomes soft in texture; peppers should be firm and crunchy. Use a sharp pair of long-bladed scissors to harvest peppers – if you yank them off the plants with your hands, you may break the stems and damage the plant. If you are harvesting hot peppers, wear disposable gloves and discard the gloves afterwards so that transfer of the spicy volatile oils doesn't occur. You don't want the capsaicin getting in your eyes!

Peppers can be stored for up to two weeks in a perforated plastic bag in the refrigerator. For long term storage, it is necessary to preserve them. They may be pickled or added to salsas, or cooked into meals, which are then frozen for later consumption.





# SWEET CORN



Sweet corn is usually ready to be picked approximately three weeks after the first bit of silk appears on the ear. The silk will become a golden-brown colour in those three weeks. When you pick the ears, the husks should still be green – they shouldn't be discoloured or show signs of mould or other issues. The ear of corn at the top of the stalk is always ready before the smaller ear below (if there is one – there isn't always).

There is a little test you can do to make sure the ear is ready. Make a small incision in the ear with a knife and nick one of the kernels. If the kernel is filled with a wet milky substance, you know the ear is ready to harvest. If the liquid isn't white in colour, then the ear isn't quite ready yet. If the kernel is hard and pulpy, it's too late to harvest and the plant is past its peak. The sugars have converted to starch.

To harvest ears of corn, pull down on the ear and twist it a bit until it snaps off of the stalk. Corn has a limited harvesting period, which often means you have to pick all of it within a few days. Be prepared for this eventuality when you do your planting in the spring!

Once the ears of corn are removed, the stalks may be pulled up and composted.

Fresh corn does not keep for very long; it lasts approximately one week in the refrigerator before a loss of flavour starts to occur. The kernels may be removed from the corn, blanched, then packaged in freezer-safe bags and frozen. Whole ears can also be blanched (without husk and silk) and frozen. Corn may also be safely canned using a pressure canner.



# BEANS



If you are growing wax, bush, or pole beans (collectively known as snap beans), you will harvest them when the pods are young and tender and just starting to plump up with the bean seeds inside. If you wait too long, and the beans inside are too fat, they will become woody and undesirable to eat. Snap beans do not all become mature at the same time, and the window of harvest can be large, so if you have many plants or have staggered your sowings, be prepared to pick beans daily for several weeks.

Colour is another indicator of readiness in snap beans – depending on the variety, they can be yellow, green, or purple. They may have a mottled pattern. When they have reached full colour, and the appropriate length for their type, they may be harvested.

Snap beans will keep for up to two weeks in the refrigerator. They may be pickled, or blanched and frozen for later use.

Shell beans such as kidney and fava beans may be harvested when they are very young for their pods, but they are specifically grown for the beans inside the pods. If you want those, wait until they become enlarged inside the pod. You can harvest them while they are still tender (green), before the pod has dried, but most gardeners wait until the pods have completely dried on the plant.

Shell beans, when fully dried, store excellently in airtight containers in a cool, dry cupboard for up to one year.

To harvest beans, use one hand to support the stem of the bean plant. With the other hand, pick beans by holding the pod near the stem. Remove the pod by pinching the stem where it meets the pod with your thumb and forefinger. This method does the least damage to the plants and prevents accidental breakage of the pod.





# PUMPKINS & WINTER SQUASH



The colour of the fruit of pumpkins and winter squash such as acorn, spaghetti, and butternut can vary. When they have reached full colour according to their cultivar, press your finger against the outer rind. If it is hard, not soft, you can pick them. The fruit may sound a bit hollow inside when you gently tap the side of the fruit. The stem of the fruit should be dry and hard, and no longer pliable. Check your seed packages to see if the fruit has reached its full size; that is also a good indicator of when to pick them. Also take a look at the days to maturity for an idea of when you can be expected to harvest them (it will be towards the end of the growing season). Be sure to get your pumpkins and winter squash out of the garden before the first frost, as the cold will turn them into mush.

To harvest pumpkins and winter squash, don't forcefully wrench them away from the stems. Carefully cut them off using a sharp knife. Leave a long stem (at least 5 to 7.6 centimetres or 2 to 3 inches) as this may discourage rot from setting in.

Pumpkins and all winter squash must be cured for long-term storage. Wipe off any soil that remains on the surface of the fruit, and gently pat it dry with a soft towel. Set the pumpkins or squash in an area that has a consistent temperature hovering around 26.6°C (80°F), for 7 to 10 days. After curing, they should last in a cool (10 to 15.5°C or 50 to 60°F), dry location for several months. Check them periodically to make sure they haven't rotted.





# SUMMER SQUASH

Summer squash such as zucchini and pattypan are fast-growing and are usually harvested in mid-summer. While it is fun to see just how big zucchini fruit can get, the truth is, they tend to get pulpy and start producing copious amounts of seeds if they are left to grow huge. Harvest zucchini when it is about 20 centimetres (8 inches) long. Likewise, pattypan are best when small, about 7.6 centimetres (3 inches) in diameter.

Summer squash can store for approximately one week in the fridge. Wrap individual fruit in a piece of paper towel to capture moisture, then place them in a plastic bag.

Summer squash such as zucchini may be shredded and frozen. Drain all the excess water from the fruit before bagging it. Summer and winter squash may be roasted, baked, or cooked into various dishes and frozen.

Remember to harvest all warm-season vegetables in the cool of the morning, instead of when the sun is beating down on the garden at midday. Process or consume your harvest as soon as possible after picking to retain its quality and freshness.





