

Harvesting Summer Vegetables

Kristin C. Goodin

Barren County Extension Agent for Horticulture

Most seed catalogs and labels list days to maturity for crops. While this may be a helpful tool, especially when scheduling seed-starting dates, succession crops, etc., it is not always reliable for calculating precise harvest dates. As a result, actual “days to maturity” may be different from year to year due to factors such as soil fertility, precipitation, and temperature. Therefore, a gardener needs to be aware of the subtle clues that indicate a vegetable is ripe for the picking. Knowing exactly when a vegetable has reached its best eating quality can be difficult to determine, especially for the first time growing a particular vegetable. See the list below for tips on harvesting some common summer vegetables.

Corn, Sweet: Harvest when the husk is still green and the silks are dry and brown. Kernels should be plump and tender. Sweet corn loses sugar from the kernel rapidly at high temperatures. Pick in the cool temperatures of early morning and cool the ears immediately after harvest. Eat fresh as soon as possible after harvest. Otherwise, store as close to 32 °F as possible in a moist environment. Sweet corn can be stored under optimal conditions for about five days, but will lose sweetness with each day of storage.

Cucumber: Begin harvesting when cucumbers are about 2 inches long up to any size, but before their flesh becomes bitter, seeds harden or skins begin to yellow. Pickling types should be harvested between 2 and 6 inches in length, while slicing and burpless types are typically picked between 6 and 10 inches long. Pick as frequently as necessary to avoid oversized fruit and to encourage continued production. Harvest the fruits by cutting stems with a sharp knife or pruners. Store cucumbers in the refrigerator for about a week.

Potato, Sweet: Harvest sweet potatoes when 30 percent are larger than 3½ inches in diameter. Harvest before frost because cool soil temperatures can reduce the quality and storage capacity of the sweet potatoes. When harvesting, it is best to cut and remove the vines before digging. Be careful while digging the sweet potatoes, as they are easily damaged. Also avoid rough handling as they are easily bruised. Sweet potatoes should be cured to heal wounds and to convert some of the starch in the roots to sugar. The optimal conditions for curing are to expose the roots to 85 °F and 90 percent humidity for one week. Few home gardeners can supply these conditions, so they should place the sweet potatoes in the warmest room in the house (usually the kitchen) for 14 days. No curing will occur at temperatures below 70 °F. After curing, store the sweet potatoes in a cool location. Never expose them to temperatures below 50 °F and never refrigerate them. Temperatures below 50 °F will result in off flavors and possibly rot the sweet potatoes. Sweet potatoes can be stored under good conditions for over 6 months.

Squash, Summer: For optimum quality, harvest while fruits are tender and still have a shiny or glossy appearance. When growing conditions are favorable, harvest squash daily or every other day. Harvest crookneck and straightneck varieties when fruit is 1½ to 2 inches in diameter. Harvest zucchini when fruit is 7 to 8 inches long and scallop types when they are 3 to 4 inches in diameter. All of these squash can be harvested at smaller sizes for extra tenderness. Do not leave large fruit of summer squash on the plant because this will inhibit the development of additional fruit. Store summer squash in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.

Tomato: Pick fruit when it is fully vine-ripened but still firm; most varieties are dark red, but many other colors are possible depending on variety. Harvested tomatoes should be placed in the shade. Ripen immature (green) fruits at 70 °F. Light isn't necessary for ripening green tomatoes. Green tomatoes can be stored at 50 to 70 °F for one to three weeks. Ripe tomatoes can be stored at room temperature (70 °F) or in the refrigerator for 4 to 7 days. However, refrigeration can reduce flavor and cause the tomatoes to develop a mealy texture.

PS The Barren County Extension District Board and Barren County Extension Council will be hosting a community-wide 100 Mile Potluck, on Saturday July 30th, from 5:00 until 7:00pm at the Barren County Extension Office Auditorium located at 1463 West Main Street in Glasgow. Admission is a potluck dish for 8 to 10 people made with grown and/or produced foods obtained within 100 miles of Glasgow. In addition to the dish, attendees are asked to bring a copy of the recipe indicating where ingredients were purchased, since this information will be shared after the event.

For other advice about harvesting vegetables or the 100 Mile Potluck Event, contact the Barren County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-651-3818 or by email at kristin.goodin@uky.edu.

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