

Prime Time Vegetables

By

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When should I be harvesting my vegetables? This is a question being asked starting this time of year. Most vegetables should be harvested while they are young. This is when they have the most flavors and are the most tender and have the most nutrients. The vegetables in the grocery stores are good but are harvested for maximum production and at stages of growth, which allow better shipment, and not necessarily the best stage for taste. Generally, first thing in the morning is the best time to harvest, the sugars are at their peak for the day and the plants are not stressed yet by hot or windy conditions. Otherwise, pick the vegetables and as soon as possible place in a cool humid place.

We are generally past the spring cool season vegetables. However, the vegetables, which are now or soon to be ready to harvest are what I will be discussing. First onions, carrots, potatoes, can certainly be harvested any time. But these can be left in the ground until frost or particularly the carrots and potatoes can be left in the ground into winter and just have a cover placed over them so you can dig them up when you are ready. These vegetables should not be washed for storage or placed in a humid environment, keep them dry and cool.

The next category of vegetables would be the summer squash varieties, peppers, and I will include cucumbers. These are best eaten or cooked when small. If you let a zucchini or cucumber getting two or three pounds to two feet long they are not very appetizing, and where are you going to find a receipt for this much zucchini? Therefore, these can be eaten at any size, but by continually picking them, they produce more fruit.

The winter squash and pumpkins should be harvested before a frost and when they have developed a full deep color over the entire plant. The skin should be hard and shiny. If you can easily scratch the skin of an acorn squash with your thumb nail it is not quite ready. These should be harvested with an inch or so of stem left on them, if you plan to store them or a while. Keep them cool with some humidity for longer term storage. Corn is best before the kernels are fully developed. It is best to start eating when the kernels are not fully filled. The longer you wait the tougher the corn gets and the more starch is accumulating in the kernels. Begin looking when the silks start to dry up and turn a darker color or around 20 days after the silk appears. I like to open the end of the ear to check the development of the kernels. Corn is best used within 72 hours of picking otherwise the sugars start turning into starch.

The last category and probably the hardest for people are the melons. Most melons are ripe when the overall color is even and the bottom area next to the ground turns from a white color to a cream or darker color. However, when you go to pick up the melon and they come off the stem by themselves for the most part then they are ripe. Watermelon is similar with some people wanting to thump them, and when the sound goes from a hollow sound to a thump sound then they are generally ripe. Generally, this takes practice and is probably more of an art than a science. Practice at the grocery store is a good place to start. Melons do not ripen after they have been picked as a tomato does. Enjoy the harvest, and attend the Farmers Market.

The University of Wyoming and the United States Department of Agriculture,
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