



KING HENRY'S WALK
garden

THE HARVEST



Aim to harvest your produce when it reaches the very peak of perfection. Some vegetables – carrots for example – have a long harvesting period over weeks, whereas others go over in as little as a day or two. Never leave over-ripe pods or fruits on a plant as this will halt production.

The ideal time to gather produce is in the morning before the sun warms it up. Even when picked, respiration and other life processes continue and keeping the produce cool will help it to stay fresher for longer. Most vegetables (with a few notable exceptions like onions and potatoes which need an initial drying in the sun) should be kept out of direct sunlight in a chill, dry and airy place as soon as they are harvested.

Avoid storing anything that is damaged or bruised as it will affect the others. Check your stores on a regular basis for this reason.

A GUIDE TO THE IDEAL MOMENT TO HARVEST VEGETABLES ...

Aubergines are best picked when slightly immature and still shiny. Twist off the stem.

Beans (Sugar snap). Are ready when pencil sized but before the seeds bulge. They should break easily and crisply into two when bent in half. If they start to turn yellow and get a corrugated skin they will be tough. Check them every day.

French and runner beans should be smooth and green all over. Yellow cultivars should be picked before the skin gets corrugated.

Beets. The sign of readiness is when the 'shoulders' stick out from the soil. Beets can be harvested golf ball sized or they can be left to grow bigger. You can harvest up to one third of

the foliage to use as greens without affecting the roots. The outer leaves can be tough and stringy but the inner leaves are good to eat.

Broad beans can be eaten entire with the pod when very young in the same way as mangetout. Otherwise harvest when the pods are bright green and the beans still tender. Either cut the beans off or twist sharply downwards to sever them.

Broccoli. Take care not to let the flower buds bloom. Pick when they are still in tight clusters. First harvest the central head. Over the next few of weeks pick the side shoots with some stem. It is unrealistic to expect home grown broccoli to reach supermarket size.

Brussels sprouts mature from the bottom up. Pick with a twisting movement when bright green, firm and about 2.5cm (1 inch) across. Remove any tatty leaves as you go. You can expect to pick about 100 sprouts per plant over several weeks.

Cabbage. The test for readiness is a gentle squeeze to see if it feels firm. Cabbages may well be ready when quite small – approx. 10cm (4ins) across – and can be left to grow on up to twice the size. If you leave them too long however, they will split.

Carrots can be eaten at any stage of their lives though for storage you need to let them grow to maturity. They will be mature when they show above the soil and you can judge their readiness by the expected size for the variety and decide whether to let them grow on further. Dig one up to check. Winter varieties can be left in the ground and it is believed that a light frost sweetens them. If left to grow too long however they will become woody.

Cauliflowers are ready when the head is tightly packed with smooth white or ivory florets. When these start to form, tie their leaves over the heads like a topknot to protect them from the sun and to prevent yellowing. As with broccoli, don't expect supermarket size.

Courgettes. Keep picking by twisting and watch out for any fruits lurking under the leaves and quietly turning into marrows. The flowers are good to eat too, deep fried in batter tempura style.

Cucumbers need to be checked daily and once ripe picked every two or three days while green and crisp and the right size for the variety. Once they turn yellow they are bitter and pithy.

Cut-and-come-again salad and oriental leaves. Allow to grow to about 10cm (4ins) and cut the outer leaves, always leaving a minimum of one third of the plant.

Garlic. In the same way as onions, the leaves will fall over when the bulbs are ready. Dig them out carefully and leave them to dry before storing.

Kale can be harvested as needed at any time. Always leaves about 30% so that it can re-sprout. It tastes best in the winter months.

Kohlrabi is best harvested at golf ball size. Pull or cut off at the base and remove the leaves and roots before storing.

Mangetout are ready when bright green and you can just discern the immature seeds within when you hold them up to the light.

Leeks. Harvest when between 2.5cm (1in) or a little more in diameter.

Lettuce (headed). For a full headed lettuce harvest when it feels firm and full. Best to err on the cautious side and pick early rather than late as they are inclined to bolt, especially in hot weather.

Lettuce (leaf) – see cut-and-come-again.

Onions. You can eat onions at any stage. If you want to store them however they need to be fully mature. Leave them until the leaves droop. Dry them in the sun or lay out in a shed to harden and brown the skin before storing.

Parsnips are best left in the ground as they taste better after a frost. They can be harvested as needed or left right through winter for spring eating.

Peas. Catch them just before they are fully ripe. The pods should be bright green and the peas within not quite round. Tasting is the best test.

Peppers and chilli can be harvested with a sharp knife when dark green, regardless of the ultimate size and colour, or they can be left longer as desired.

Potatoes. Early potatoes are ready when they flower around June. Lates, for storing, are ready when the leaves start to go brown. Check by digging up a plant. Always work from the outside in, cautiously edging towards the plant to avoid damage. Harvest maincrop potatoes on a sunny day and leave them to dry in the sun. For the first two weeks keep them 10 – 15°C as this promotes a hardening of the skin. Then store in sacks and keep in a cool dry place. If you befriend your greengrocer, you may be able to get old potato sacks from him or her. Potatoes from Cyprus and Spain still come in sacking sacks, otherwise these days they are made of paper and greengrocers are inclined to slash them open unless you ask them to save you some ahead.

Pumpkins and summer squash. As long as the weather holds out, leave them until the fruits turn orange. To test for ripeness, stick a fingernail into the skin. If it penetrates easily, the fruit will be ready. If they are lying on the ground put straw or something else under them to keep them clean.

Radishes are ready when the ‘shoulders’ show above ground. Don’t leave too long as they quickly become woody.

Sweet corn. The first sign that the corn feast isn’t too far away is seeing clouds of pollen floating in the air when you walk by. Then a couple of weeks later, the ‘silks’ turn dark brown. The test is to peel back the outer husk and dig a nail into a kernel. If perfectly ripe, the juice that comes out will be milky. This stage only lasts for a couple of days. If the juice is transparent it is too early, if it is ‘doughy’, it’s too late and your corn is only good for corn chowder!

Swiss chard can be treated as a cut-and-come-again crop. Cut the outer stems as needed and leave to grow on.

Spinach. Catch it before the flower stalks appear. Spinach goes to seed quickly so keep a sharp eye on it.

Tomatoes are a prolific crop that needs harvesting several times a week. Pick the fruits when perfect and come back tomorrow for those that need a little more time. At the end of the season and if they are growing up stakes, take the stakes out, lay the plants on the ground on straw and cover with cloches to speed up ripening. Alternatively pick the green tomatoes and put them in a paper bag in a drawer with a ripe banana or apple. The ethylene gas that they exude promotes ripening.

Turnips are best eaten at golf ball size though they can be left to grow on. They will be full sized when the ‘shoulders’ showing above ground are about 5cm – 7.5cm (2 to 3 ins).

... AND FRUIT

Apples ripen at different times according to variety, also depending where they are on the tree. The ones on the sunny side will ripen first. Early apples should be eaten fairly soon after harvesting, mid-season ones will keep for a couple of months and late ones can be stored all winter. Test ripeness by cupping one in your hand and twist. If it is ready it will come off easily with a little stalk. As they bruise easily, store apples carefully, ideally wrapping each one in paper, before laying them in a box.

Pears are picked when still hard and ripened indoors. If left on the tree to ripen they often spoil and go brown inside. Like apples they should twist off easily. Lay them in single layers unwrapped and keep in a cool place like the bottom of the fridge, bringing them in to a warm room to ripen as you need them. Pears only keep for a few weeks.

Soft fruits are picked when still firm if they are to be used for jam or when ripe for eating. Berries are picked individually and currants in clusters or 'strigs'. Blueberries bear fruits in clusters like currants but are picked individually as they ripen at different times. They are ready when they turn bluish black with a waxy bloom and soften a little.

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