

Here's a guide for picking vegetables

NEWARK, DEL. — One big reason for growing vegetables at home is to obtain fresh, high quality produce. To take full advantage of a garden, crops must be picked when they're at their best eating quality. This is sometimes easier said than done, though it's crucial to successful gardening, says University of Delaware Extension garden specialist Dave Tatnall. Also, proper harvesting helps prolong productivity of certain crops.

Cucumbers, for example, are eaten in the immature stage. So are some other fruit-type vegetables such as beans, peas, summer squash, eggplant and peppers.

With this group, frequent removal of all fruits before they grow past the usual eating stage helps plants produce over a longer period than if some fruits are allowed to become overripe.

"The trick for getting prime quality is to learn how to read the signs which indicate proper maturity," says Tatnall.

Cucumbers for slicing should be picked while young, green and nearly full length, yet fairly slender. Cucumbers for pickles may range from very small to full size, but pick them before they turn yellow.

Radishes are one of the earliest annual garden vegetables. They're edible as soon as they reach usable size. In this stage they can be enjoyed daily, but prime eating quality lasts only a few days—especially in hot weather.

As for summer squash, some gardeners wait until fruits become too large. The best time to pick is while they're relatively small and

the rind is tender. As with cucumbers, oversized squash should be removed from plants to encourage the development of more flowers and fruit.

Most sweet peppers are eaten in the green stage. Pick them after fruits reach full size and have become fairly firm and glossy. To get red peppers, leave fruit on plants longer, but be aware that this may reduce later fruit development.

Eggplants are ready when fully colored and the usual size for the variety. Inside, seeds should be white and flesh fairly firm. "There's no sure way to know when eggplant is ready except to cut into it and examine the seeds," Tatnall says. "If they're brown and hard, you waited too long. The only solution is to start picking sooner."

Peas should be harvested when pods are well filled but the peas themselves are still sweet and tender. This vegetable contains more sugar early in the season and remains at top table quality for only a short time. The hotter the weather the quicker peas pass the edible stage.

Potatoes can be dug as soon as several tubers reach an inch or so in diameter. Since they'll continue to grow, don't dig them all. Tatnall suggests digging a hill or two at a time as needed.

Watermelons must be allowed to ripen fully before harvest. There are a number of theories on how to recognize a ripe one. One way is to wait until the bottom of the melon has become a pale tan or cream color.

A mature cantaloupe will separate easily from the vine with

a light pull on the stem. This is known as the full slip stage. As the fruit ripens, the background color between the netting changes from green to light yellow. This means the melon is approaching maturity and it's a good time to pick. Aroma is also a sign of ripeness.

Tomatoes can be picked any time after the red color starts to show. Fruits not fully red will ripen best at room temperature (70 degrees F). They won't color up in the refrigerator or at temperatures below 55 degrees F, so wait for full color to develop before chilling or putting in cold storage.

On the other hand, refrigerate snap beans, cucumbers, sweet corn and summer squash as soon as they're picked. Peppers, eggplant, watermelons and cantaloupes will keep well in a cool place (55-60 degrees F) until cooked or chilled for eating. Peppers and eggplant dry out rapidly unless protected in plastic bags, however.

The curd or edible part of the cauliflower plant will stay white if protected from sunlight, but unprotected heads (though slightly yellowish) are just as tasty, Tatnall says. In warm weather check curd development often. Heads are ready to cut when they reach 3 to 4 inches or more in diameter.

Harvest broccoli when individual flower buds have developed some size—but while still compact and before they show yellow. The small heads which develop on side branches after the main head has been cut are ideal for freezing.

Pumpkins and winter squash should be picked when fully

mature and rinds are hard. Acorn and butternut squash will be green when ready; butternut will be light tan; color of other kinds will depend on the variety. Harvest them all before or soon after first frost, as cold weather will damage fruit. Store in a cool dry place (about 55 degrees F is best).


When onions are mature, the tops will fall over. When that happens, pull plants and dry them in open shade for a week or two. Then cut off tops and roots and store at a low temperature (35 to 40 degrees F) if possible. A tem-

perature of around 80 degrees F is next best. Onions do not keep well at temperatures between 50 and 60 degrees F. Keeping quality also depends on the particular variety.

As for root crops such as beets, carrots, radishes and turnips, start harvesting as soon as the fastest growing ones reach usable size, selecting only the biggest. This helps thin the crop and lets smaller plants continue growing with less competition. Follow a similar procedure for leaf lettuce and other leafy vegetables.

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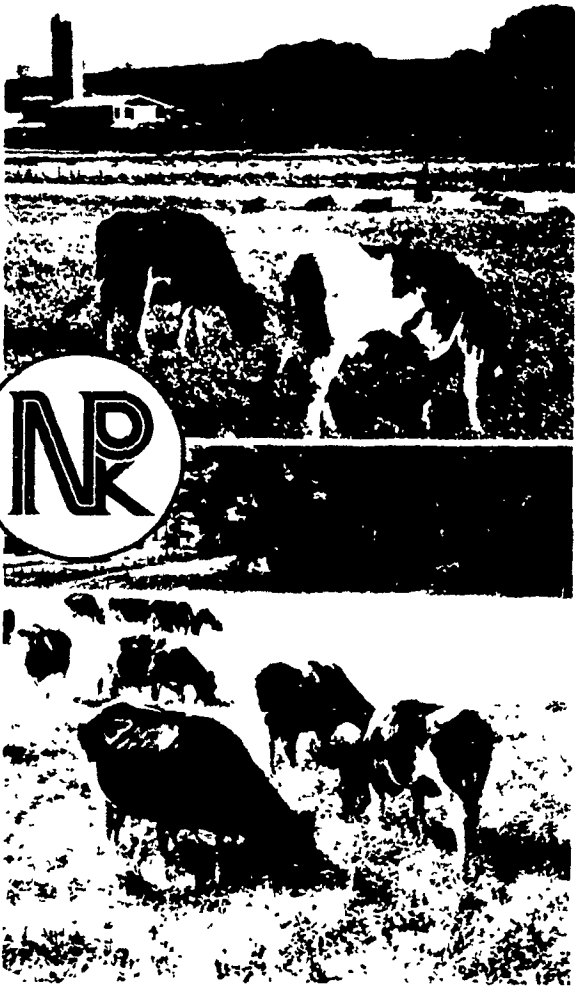


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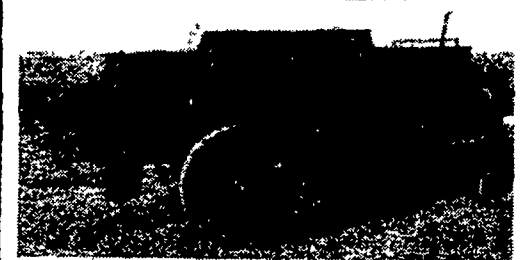
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