

Vegetable Fruits Harvest and Storage
By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator
Release: Week of September 14, 2020

The part of any plant that carries the seed is the fruit of the plant botanically speaking. We eat the fruit of a number of vegetables including green beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, and squash. If it has seeds inside of it, the part of the plant we are eating is the fruit. Even sweet corn.

With the garden season winding down here are some harvest and storage tips for common vegetable fruits being harvested now; especially for those new to gardening since growing vegetables is gaining in popularity.

Tomatoes taste best if allowed to ripen on the vine. They taste almost as good if they've at least turned yellow or orange before harvesting. If so, they will continue to ripen once harvested from the vine.

However, if frost threatens, green tomatoes can be harvested and will still turn red as long as the fruit has reached the mature green stage. Tomatoes are at this stage if the green fruit is full sized and has a white, star shaped area on the bottom.

It is not recommended to use tomatoes harvested from vines after the vines have been damaged by frost. Harvest needs to take place prior to frost.

When harvesting tomatoes before frost, separate them into three groups. Fruit that are mostly red, those just beginning to turn color, and mature green fruit. Check on them often for the need to use.

As with any vegetable, discard tomatoes with defects such as bruising, rot or skin cracks or quickly use these tomatoes rather than keeping them for any time. Damaged produce breaks down quickly and are more likely to attract fruit flies.

For short term storage, place tomatoes on cardboard trays and use layers of newspaper to separate the fruit. If a tomato begins to rot and leak juice, the newspaper will keep juice away from nearby fruit.

Hold tomatoes as close to 55 degrees Fahrenheit as possible. The warmer it is, the sooner they will ripen and need to be eaten or processed. Do not place tomatoes in refrigerators as this lowers flavor quality.

Winter squash and pumpkins must be mature and ready to eat when harvested. This is true of melons as well. Once harvested, these fruits will not continue to ripen off the vine.

Pumpkins and winter squash will rot if harvested before they're mature or if they're left in the garden too long and exposed to freezing temperatures. These fruit are mature once fully colored and the shell is hard and not easily punctured by your thumbnail. Some, like acorn squash, may have a golden ground color.

Once mature, use a sharp knife to cut the fruit from the vine, leaving as long of a stem as possible on the fruit. Ideally, cut the vine and not the fruit stem.

After harvesting, cure winter squash and pumpkins, with the exception of acorn squash, to further harden the shell and heal surface wounds. They can be cured in the garden by cutting them from the vine and leaving outdoors for seven to fourteen days as long as the weather is dry and warm.

If the weather is cold or rainy, or there is a threat of a freeze, curing should take place in a warm shed or garage for about ten days. If squash and pumpkins must be left in the field, a piece of cardboard or a board can be placed beneath the fruit to reduce contact with damp soil.

Once harvested mature and then cured, squash and pumpkins will keep for 10 weeks or longer if stored in a cool, dry location.