



SCHOOL GARDEN HARVESTING GUIDE

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Harvesting is one of the nicest chores of the season. If you follow a few important, but easy tips, you will get the most of your crops. Some crops (e.g. carrots) only provide one harvest, while other crops (e.g. lettuce) can provide multiple harvests. If possible, harvest early in the morning, after the dew dries, but before the heat of the day.



LEAFY GREENS – Lettuce & the Brassica Family (including Spinach, Kale, Chard, Collards, Asian Greens, Mustards)

To harvest at peak flavor and freshness, harvest young greens when they are just a few inches long. At this stage all greens are tender and delicious eaten raw in a salad. These are called “baby greens”. Pick the largest, outside, leaves first while leaving the smaller and younger inside leaves for harvesting in a week or two. If possible, eat your greens the same day you pick them. Larger leaves, 6-12” long, are less tender and are best for cooking. Remember that greens cook down; plan about 6 cups of greens for 4 usual servings. Always wash garden greens carefully before eating or cooking to remove dirt and small insects.

Tip: Snip (with scissors or skilled fingers) the greens about ½-1” above the base of the plant to encourage new growth. Harvesting this way will allow you to get 3-5 cuttings of lettuce and spinach and even more from kale, chard and other hardier greens.

Note on Lettuce: If you planted head lettuce and prefer to harvest an entire head, wait until the entire lettuce plant is about softball - melon size and looks like the shape of head lettuce, as you know it. Don't wait too long though - Growing head lettuce rather than harvesting baby greens often allows more time for pests and diseases to attack the crop.



LEGUMES – Peas, Snow Peas, Beans

Harvest peas with 2 hands, holding the vine with one hand while snipping the entire pod off the vine with your other hand. Harvest when fully mature, about 2” long for peas and 4” long for beans, depending on the variety planted. Harvesting encourages new growth, so be sure to pick off over-ripe pods you may have missed earlier on. Continue to harvest from the same vines as the legume ripens.

Simple Greens Recipe

- Wash and dry greens and cut larger leaves into pieces about 3 inches long.
- Heat a bit of olive oil in pan with a clove of chopped garlic or a few tablespoons of chopped onion. Cook 2-3 minutes.
- Add greens and a dash of water. You may keep the greens plain or drizzle with a dash of soy sauce or balsamic vinegar. Cook 3-4 minutes until softened.
- Remove from heat, place into bowl. Sprinkle with slivered almonds, sunflower seeds and dried cranberries, or chives chopped chives from your garden. Serve cold or warm.

Peas and young beans can be eaten raw, added to salads, or lightly steamed or sautéed.



CUCUMBERS & SQUASH (*CUCURBIT* FAMILY)

Harvest cucumbers as they ripen to the desired size. For pickling, fruits should be 4 to 5 inches long, for eating fresh; most varieties grow to 7-8 inches long.

Cucumbers will develop a bitter taste if they are allowed to over-ripen. (Note: Some varieties such as European or Dutch cucumbers can grow much longer. This is another reason why clear labeling of the plants in the ground is useful.)

To ensure cucumber vines continue to produce heavily all season long, it's best to harvest daily to prevent them from becoming overgrown.

Enjoy cucumbers raw, in a salad or try making some pickles!
For easy and safe refrigerator pickle recipes, contact your local Cooperative Extension office.

Even though huge zucchini squash are impressive, they will be more flavorful if they are picked when they are smaller.

Tip: Use a sharp knife or pair of scissors when harvesting, and leave a short length of stem on each fruit.



Roots –Carrot, Beets, Radish, Potato

It can be difficult to determine if root crops are full grown and ready to harvest because they grow underneath the soil. You may recall, most seed packets will tell you how many “Days to Harvest”. This is the number of days it takes from planting to harvesting. If you can keep track of when you planted the seeds (maybe you wrote it down in the garden journal or it's listed on the label that next to the plant in the ground), you'll know about when they are ready. That said visual clues are always helpful. Roots start to lift themselves up out of the ground a bit as they develop. You'll see radishes, beets and carrots creep a bit (< 1/4 inch) above the soil giving you a clue about how wide they are getting.

Tip: Radishes and beets are easy to pull out of the ground whole. Carrots often break off, leaving half of that sweet orange snack for the worms. To harvest them whole, use a digging fork to loosen the soil around the root and pull it out at the base of the greens. For radishes and beets, grab the plant right at the base of the stem, loosen the root a bit by rocking it back and forth, and then pull. If the whole thing does not come up, gently use a digging fork as you would for carrots.

Did you know?
Beet greens are edible and incredibly nutritious. You can harvest a few from each plant when small and add them to salads, or wait until you harvest the root and cook them up like you do kale, chard or other greens.

For potatoes, you can start gently digging for new potatoes once the plants start to bloom. Wash and cook new potatoes immediately, as they do not store well at all. If you are planning to harvest potatoes to store for a while, wait until the tops of the plants start to yellow and die back. Then gently dig around the perimeter of the plant and dig up the tubers. If you are

planning on storing them, don't wash them! Let them sit out in a cool place for a few days to cure, then gently rub off any dirt, and store in a cool, dark place.



FRUITS – Strawberries, Tomatoes, Peppers, Eggplant

Similar to cucurbits, fruits like to be harvested when ripe and harvesting regularly encourages new production. Use a scissors or be very careful to snip eggplant and peppers from the stem without damaging the fruit. Leaving a small stem on the harvested fruit will help keep it ripe and ensure you don't bruise it when harvested. Carefully pick tomatoes from the plant. For strawberries, grasp the stem just above the berry between the forefinger and the thumbnail and pull with a slight twisting motion. Carefully place the fruit into your containers.



HERBS – Basil, parsley, mint, cilantro, oregano, rosemary, tarragon, sage, chives, lavender, thyme & more.

Herbs are grown for their leaves, flower, roots or seed. Most commonly, culinary herbs are grown for their leaves and should be harvested before they flower. Flowering can cause the foliage to develop a bitter flavor. For example, while chives are quite attractive in bloom – and their flowers are edible and delicious – the stems tend to become tough and woody after bloom. Some general guidelines for harvesting herbs:

- Begin harvesting the herb when the plant has steadily been producing new growth. Harvesting generates the plant to continue to produce. Just be sure to leave enough leaves so the plant can continue to photosynthesize. Don't be afraid to harvest. Up to 75% of the current season's growth can be harvested at one time!
- Harvest herbs before flowering, otherwise, leaf production declines because the plant will put its energy towards flowering and producing seed to reproduce. *Tip:* Pick off flowers buds as you notice them develop.
- 'Annual' herbs (basil, cilantro, chives) will have to be planted each year. They have soft stems and can be harvested until frost. Perennial herbs (rosemary, lavender) have somewhat woody stems and can be clipped until about one month before the frost date.

“Healthy Gardens, Healthy Youth”
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