

## Harvesting the Fruits of Your Labor

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Some of my favorite childhood memories are of summertime picnics in the backyard with my family. Good food, good laughs and, come August, lots of watermelon. It was just the right treat at the end of a hot summer's day.

Melons belong to the cucurbit family, which includes squash, pumpkins and cucumbers. Recently, I was asked by a gardener new to growing melons in the home garden, how you can tell when they are ripe. Picking a melon at its peak flavor relies on harvesting at the right stage of maturity. For watermelon, some gardeners use the "thumping" technique. They thump or tap the melon. If a hollow or dull sound is heard, then the melon is considered ready. However, not everyone can clearly hear the difference between the sound a mature melon makes versus an immature one. A more reliable way to determine proper harvest time is when the underside or "ground spot" turns from a greenish white to a yellowish or cream color. Ripe watermelons also tend to lose their glossy look and take on a dull appearance. Plus, watch for the tendrils nearest the melon to curl and turn brown.

Muskmelon or cantaloupe, is ready to eat when the stem slips easily away from the fruit. It should pull off with little or no effort. Also look at the muskmelon's appearance. The netlike skin becomes rough-textured and the skin between the netting turns light tan to yellow in color. You should also be able to smell that muskmelon aroma from the fruit.

If you grow honeydew, knowing when to pick the fruit is a little more difficult. Unlike muskmelon, honeydew fruit does not slip off the vine when mature. Instead, look for changes such as the tendrils near the stem of the fruit becoming brown and dry, the blossom end of the fruit feeling slightly soft and a subtle change in the color of the melon's skin.

The benefit of growing melons in the home garden is that they can be harvested at peak ripeness for the best taste. Proper storage will help prolong their shelf life. Uncut watermelon stored at room temperature will last about a week. It will keep longer if kept between 50 to 60 degrees F. Store freshly harvested muskmelon in the refrigerator where, depending on the cultivar, it can last up to two weeks. Honeydew should also be kept at a cooler temperature. Store between 45 to 50 degrees F. for best results.

Other vegetables that gardeners are harvesting now include sweet corn, peppers and tomatoes. Sweet corn is ready to harvest at the "milky" stage. This refers to kernels that when pierced with a thumb nail produce a milky juice. At this stage, the silks are usually brown and dry at the tip of the ear. The milk stage typically occurs about 15 to 24 days after the silk appears. However, timing of this will vary depending on weather conditions. Weather will also affect how long sweet corn remains at its peak for harvest. You can store unhusked corn in the refrigerator for several days.

Peppers can be harvested when they are mature or in the immature green stage. If allowed to ripen on the plant, their color will turn from green to red, or depending on the variety, yellow, orange, purple or even brown. Pick peppers when they reach a desirable size. Bell peppers are often picked while still green and unripe. Fresh peppers will store for about a week in the refrigerator.

Allow tomatoes to fully ripen on the vine for the best flavor. With most types of tomatoes, the fruit will come off the plant easily when its mature. Fruit picked before peak ripeness can be ripened indoors when kept at room temperature. Tomato color at maturity will vary by cultivar. Most people I know prefer not to store ripe tomatoes in the refrigerator as they tend to lose flavor if stored more than a few days. Left at room temperature, tomatoes can keep for up to six days or so.

For more information on harvesting garden vegetables, see the UW-Madison Extension publication, *Harvesting Vegetables from the Home Garden* (number A2727), which you can view or download as a free pdf at <https://learningstore.extension.wisc.edu/>.

Happy harvesting!

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