

LESSON 8

Using Your Harvested Food

Much of your harvesting can be done by intuition: by noticing when veggies look ready to eat and then pulling them. In this lesson we'll discuss a few additional tips to help maximize your harvest. Since harvesting techniques vary from plant to plant, we won't go into detail on each, but rather we'll give several broader ideas and resources for you to find more information.

As discussed earlier, your garden is meant to grow food for you and your family. Hopefully, you've planted things you want to eat! We strongly encourage eating with the seasons as a means of saving money, reducing the distance food travels from farm to fork, and improving your health. There are many resources online and in the library to help you plan your plate around the local harvest and enjoy garden, fresh cooking. Gardeners sometimes find that they are producing more fruits and vegetables than they can eat, so preserving and trading are good skills to have. An abbreviated list of resources is provided below for instruction on how to cook, preserve, share, and celebrate the fruits of your labor.

Learning Objectives

1. Know some tips for proper harvesting and additional resources.
2. Know a variety of resources for information on using your harvest.

Harvesting

As mentioned above, your garden produce should be harvested when it looks ready to eat, but the following are a few additional things to keep in mind:

Harvest early in the day for maximum crispness and flavor. Vegetables lose water throughout the day, so they are firmest early in the day.

Many vegetables give you an ongoing harvest, meaning that you can harvest some and harvest more later from the same plant. For example, remove outside leaves from leaf lettuces (as opposed to head lettuces like iceberg) as they become large, and leave the inside leaves to harvest later. You can harvest leaves off of kale and chard as well, and the plant will keep growing. For broccoli, cut the head when it's full size but the buds are still tightly closed, and you'll likely get additional heads that grow off the side of that stem.

Use a small, sharp knife to harvest anything that doesn't easily slip off the plant, to avoid damaging the plant. Knives are especially important for lettuces, since the plants are somewhat fragile.

Harvest tomatoes when they are ripe, rather than letting them stay on the plant. After peak ripeness they begin to lose their sugars, even on the plant, so harvest when they seem to be fully colored.

Seeds packets will provide you with tips on harvesting the particular crop. In addition, you can check out the following resources:

- Weekend Gardener. Vegetable and Fruit Harvest Guide. "How and when to harvest and successfully store your crops." Available at: www.weekendgardener.net/vegetable-gardening-tips/harvest-090709.htm
Timing and tips for harvesting many of the common garden veggies.
- University of California. University of California Garden Web. "Vegetables." Available at: <http://ucanr.org/sites/gardenweb/Vegetables/> Detailed growing and harvesting techniques and information on a large number of vegetables.
- Gardens Alive!. "When to Harvest Tomatoes, Melons, and other Top Crops." Available at: www.gardensalive.com/article.asp?ai=893 Tips for harvesting melons and tomatoes.





Cooking

The simplest way to find recipes for your garden veggies is simply through Google™. Search for the ingredient(s) you want to use and you'll find many recipes to choose from. Here are a few particular sites to get you started:

Network for a Healthy California's Champions for Change

www.cachampionsforchange.net/en/Recipes.php

Recipes and tips on incorporating fruits and veggies.

Suzie's Farm

www.suziesfarm.com/index.php?/site/recipes

Recipes by vegetable, written for members of the Suzie's Farm CSA.

Epicurious's Seasonal Cooking

www.epicurious.com/articlesguides/seasonalcooking

Ingredient-based recipes and a map of current seasonal produce in the US.

Preserving

When you have more of something than you can eat before it goes bad, or you just want to have a particular vegetable from your garden at another time during the year, preserve it. Preserving includes canning, pickling, jamming, drying, and freezing. Canning actually means preserving a vegetable/fruit in a glass jar with a lid that is sealed with pressure from a hot water bath. It is a simple process, but it does take attention and care to avoid introducing bacteria into the jar that can spoil your preserve and make you sick later. A few resources to learn the processes of preserving:

PreserveFood.com

www.preservefood.com

Details on all types of preserving.

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National Center for Home Food Preservation

www.uga.edu/nchfp/index.html

Details on all types of preserving, through the US Department of Food and Agriculture.

Canning-Food-Recipes.com

www.canning-food-recipes.com/canning.htm

Details on what and how to can.

Sharing

The concept of sharing is self-explanatory, but many gardeners have started trading their produce more formally as a way to deal with overabundance and increase variety. You might be producing many tomatoes, and your neighbor is long on zucchini; a fair trade between you and your neighbor can resolve both issues and diversify your diet. San Diego's organized version of this process is called Crop Swapper <http://cropswapper.blogspot.com>.

This site is a forum for gardeners interested in swapping crops. A less formal means of garden sharing can be found by taking time to meet your neighbors that garden, find out what they are growing, and make some trades.

Happy sharing!