

Harvesting and Handling Vegetables

Cary Sims

Angelina County Extension Agent

(This article appeared in the June 3, 2007 edition of Lufkin Daily News)

Spring gardens are ripening around the area. While you may have worked hard with your garden thus far, the final stage of enjoying results remains. Harvesting at peak quality, handling properly and storing under optimum conditions help the overall eating quality of vegetables.

Vegetables continue to carry on life processes even after picking. It is important to retard these living reactions in mature products. For immature products such as green tomatoes store at room temperature to enhance the ripening process.

Except for ripening, storage does not improve quality. A vegetable must possess high quality characteristics and be cultivated properly for it to be acceptable.

Some vegetables are more prone to damage during harvesting than others, but avoiding bruises and cuts in handling is important with all commodities. Discard any with decay or rot so it does not affect the good produce. Washing certain vegetables in cold running water immediately after harvest removes soil, dust or other contaminants and helps lower the temperature.

To store any vegetable successfully, the following requirements need careful consideration.

Temperature. The conversion of sugar to starch is critical in products such as sweet corn and peas. It is necessary to cool these products immediately to minimize this change. If possible, harvest vegetable early in the morning or right before you intend to use them.

Moisture. Proper humidity varies with commodities. Leafy-type vegetables require a high-humidity (95 per cent) whereas onions should be stored in a drier atmosphere, such as 65 to 70% relative humidity.

Ventilation Wilting and tissue breakdown are minimized by proper air circulation. A discussion on harvesting, handling and storing the more common homegrown vegetables follows:

Corn, sweet. Watch for signs of ripeness for earliest harvest. Corn silks darken and dry out as ears mature. As kernels fill out toward the top, ends become more blunt instead of pointed. Pick sweet corn in the milk stage, when a milk-like juice exudes from kernels if crushed with a thumbnail. Sweet corn is very susceptible to rapid sugar-to-starch conversion; therefore, cook, eat or chill immediately after harvest.

Okra. Three to 4 inches is an optimum length for harvesting before pods reach the hollow, puffy stage and while they are easy to break or cut from stalk. Pick okra every day or two for continued harvest. Chill immediately.

Peas. If you expect to shell the peas, harvest pods when they are shiny green and fully developed. Overly mature peas are poor quality. Deterioration proceeds rapidly at high temperatures. Wash and chill immediately.

Peppers. Harvest bell peppers when they are 4 to 5 inches long with full, well-formed lobes. Immature peppers are soft, pliable, thin fleshed and pale. Harvest jalapenos when they are 2 to 2½ inches long. Mature peppers turn orange or red; this does not mean they are hotter. Store at 40 to 50 degrees F.

Potatoes, "new". Harvest "new" potatoes at any size but generally do not dig before tubers are 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches in diameter. Let potatoes dry several hours in garden after digging. Do not expose potatoes to sunlight for any period of time. Remove adhering soil but do not wash before storage. Store in cool, dry area.

Tomatoes. Harvest when they are fully colored but still firm. Harvest red tomatoes for eating fresh, cooking or canning. Do not can overripe tomatoes. If necessary, pick mature green or slightly pink tomatoes and ripen at room temperature, out of direct sunlight. Store ripe tomatoes in the refrigerator.

Watermelons. Harvest when fruits are full size, have a dull surface and creamy colored ground spot.