

Perfect picks: Harvesting summer's bounty

From crabapples to carrots, harvest time is full-tilt starting... now!



By Katharine Fletcher

I will never forget the summer of 1989. It was our first year here at Spiritwood Farm – and my husband Eric planted an entire package of zucchini seeds. Who knew every plant would not only survive but produce seemingly endless numbers of fruit? This variety of summer squash is renowned for its high yields of sometimes rather alarmingly large fruit. That unforgettable season, we filled wheelbarrows full of zucchini and placed them by our front door, urging any visitor who ventured near to take one or three home with them.

We're more experienced now, but still, sometimes yields seem to "get away with us." It's prudent, therefore, particularly with high producers like squash, to check the patch regularly, lest some fruits start to grow large, pithy and unpalatable. Although country fairs give prizes for such things as the largest (or most unusually shaped) vegetable, large fruits and vegetables have a tendency to be pulpy, overly mature and sometimes tasteless.

Therefore, checking the vegetable patch daily is wise. Not only are smaller fruits and vegetables tastier, by picking them you are encouraging the plant to produce more crop. Some will continue producing until the first frost, others will continue until the first really hard frost.

Most fruits and vegetables in our Ottawa and Valley gardens need to be picked before the first frost. But how do we tell when they are ripe?

Apples and crabapples

Depending upon the variety of apple, you can start picking anytime now. Look for firm fruit and don't hesitate to do a taste test – the sure way to tell, with apples, if the tree is ready to be picked. Here at Spiritwood, we have several heritage apples such as purple passion (a cider apple) which we'll pick in mid-September, while we picked our crabapple (variety unknown) during the second-last week of August. Some apples store well during winter in a cool, dry place (Northern spy is an excellent keeper) while others don't (such as crabapples).

Beets

A good rule of thumb for picking beets is they are ready to harvest when you see the beet's "shoulders" protrude from the soil. However, that being said, beets are picker-friendly. Pick them when you want: when they are small (even the size of a loonie) or when they're baseball sized – and anywhere in between. They are hardy, so they can be picked after a hard frost – although it's way easier if the ground isn't frozen! Last year a neighbour of ours overwintered her beets, as did we with our carrots. However, because we cannot depend on a winter like last year's, with its deep blanket of snow to protect such crops, unless you wish to experiment, pick most or all of your beets before the ground freezes.

Brussel Sprouts

Members of the brassica (cabbage) family, sprouts grow from the bottom-up on tall spires. Use a small, sharp knife to cut them from the stalk when they are bright green and firm – perhaps an inch in width or more. Don't let them yellow on the plant.

Carrots

Like beets, you will see carrots' shoulders appear in the soil and anytime after they emerge, pending what your preference is, they are ready to harvest. Last winter, several rows of our carrots overwintered successfully but again, you cannot count on this (although a root vegetable, they do not reliably overwinter as parsnips do).

Kohlrabi

Another member of the brassica family, kohlrabi are delicious when the bulb – which appears above ground – is between 2-3 inches in diameter. Sliced raw, they are a delicious dipping vegetable or served raw sliced into "coins" to serve with cheeses instead of crackers.

Leeks

Members of the alium or onion family, leeks are delectable when their diameter is about the size of a loonie. Depending upon the winter's snow cover, they may be able to overwinter relatively successfully (although can tend to be mushy).

Tomatoes

Pick tomatoes when they are a glossy red (or yellow, or purple, pending the colour of the variety you are growing) and a little soft to the touch (that is, not hard). When you hear warnings of the first frost, be vigilant: either cover the plants or else pick even the green fruit. Ensure they are dry, not oozing any juice. Some gardeners wrap each fruit with tissue or news paper, although I have successfully stored green and reddish tomatoes in a cool, dry place until they all ripen or have otherwise been incorporated into delectable chutneys and pickles.

Enjoy the fruits of your labours!

Katharine Fletcher lives at Spiritwood Farm north of Quyon where she and her husband Eric Fletcher enjoy their organic vegetable and perennial gardens. They

are award-winning authors of five regional historical and ecological guides to the National Capital Region as well as the province of Quebec. Find these at Ottawa-area.

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