



Harvesting Fruit

James C. Schmidt, Horticulturist
University of Illinois

It is important to harvest fruits at the proper stage of maturity in order to maintain their nutrients as well as their quality and freshness. Factors that favor conserving quality and nutrients are timely harvesting, preferably done early in the day; prompt cooling; gentle handling; and proper storage if the fruit is not used immediately. Of the fruits that store well, only those that mature in late fall, such as apples, pears, and grapes, should be considered for home storage. The other kinds of fruits should be stored for short periods of time only, or preserved for winter use by canning, freezing, or drying.

Apple – The best time for harvest of apples is based on the condition and maturity of the fruit. An early indication of the approaching harvest time is when normal, unblemished fruit begins to drop. Check to see if the flesh color at the bottom of the fruit has turned from green to yellow-green. A taste test will also indicate that the starches are turning to sugar. When all signs of maturity are present, the apple should pick easily with the stem still attached to the fruit. Picking is done by rolling or twisting the apple away from the fruit spur. Harvested apples should be kept cold (33° to 35°F.) for retention of flavor and quality. When stored in this temperature range, apples change very little. At 40°F, they ripen slowly, and at 60°F or higher they mature rapidly. The best way to store apples is in perforated plastic bags in the refrigerator.

Apricot – Allow the fruit to become firm ripe on the tree. It should be slightly soft, golden-yellow, and easily separated from the stem. Fruit that is to be dried should first ripen fully on the tree. Apricots keep for about three weeks if stored in cool temperatures (40° to 50°F.).

Blackberry – Pick the fruit as it becomes soft and sweet and almost drops off at the slightest touch. It is best to pick early in the day, because blackberries picked in the morning do not spoil as quickly as those harvested in the afternoon. Berries that are picked at the proper time, handled carefully, and stored in a cool place will stay in good condition for several days.

Blueberry – A fully ripe blueberry will be uniform in color and should easily come loose from the plant. If it take any appreciable pressure to pick them, the berries aren't fully ripe. Furthermore, a reddish ring around the "scar" (indentation where the fruit is attached to the stem) also indicates that the berry is not ripe. It is best to pick blueberries by gently rolling each one from the cluster with the thumb into the palm of the hand. When picking is done this way, the berries that aren't ripe will not come loose. After harvesting, cool blueberries as quickly as possible to about 35°F. Harvest at weekly intervals.

Cherry – Cherries, like peaches, continue to increase in size until they are ripe. They should be picked when they are of maximum size and full-flavored. Cherries picked before they are fully mature will not ripen off the tree. Sweet cherries become firm when ripe, and sour cherries part easily from the tree. They can be picked with or without the stems.

Currant – For eating out-of-hand, currants should be dead ripe and picked just before eating. For making jam and jelly, however, pick them when they are firm but not fully ripe. Pectin content is high at this stage. Currants have a naturally high pectin content and thus are excellent choices for jelly- and jam-making. To harvest currants, twist the cluster off of the branch first, then strip the berries from the cluster. Don't attempt to pick the berries one-by-one.

Elderberry – The fruit should be picked in clusters rather than as individual berries. After picking, the fruit can be stripped from the stems. Use care not to strip off the stem pieces with the berries. When picking elderberries for jelly-making, use only those which are about half-ripe.

Gooseberry – Gooseberry fruits are often picked in the green or immature stage, but when they have reached full size. They may, however, be left off the bush to ripen more fully to a pinkish color and sweeter flavor. The berries can be picked from the plant individually or stripped off the stem leaves and all (wear leather gloves) and separated later.

Grape – Grapes should not be picked until they are fully ripe because they will not develop full flavor if harvested before they are completely mature. The best indications of ripeness are color and flavor. The natural bloom on the grape will become noticeable at the fully ripe stage, and the berries will become slightly less firm to the touch. Cut each cluster from the vine with a knife or pruning shears, handling them as little as possible. Lay the clusters in a basket or other container, using care to avoid crushing. Unlike most small fruits, grapes will keep for several weeks if they are picked carefully and stored in a very cool, well-ventilated place. Keep grapes away from other kinds of produce because they readily absorb odors.

Nectarine – Ripe nectarines have a creamy-yellow background color and yield slightly to pressure, particularly along the seam. They are usually ready to pick when a slight twist frees the fruit from the stem. They can be stored for three to four weeks at 30°F and high humidity.

Peach – Peaches are best picked when the fruit separates easily from the twigs. Pick them when the ground color changes from green to yellow. The skin of yellow-fleshed varieties ripens to an orange tint, while the skin of white-fleshed varieties changes from greenish- to yellow-white. For best flavor, allow the fruit to ripen fully on the tree. Store at 32°F and high humidity.

Pear – The fruit can be ripened on the tree, but for better quality, they are best picked early and allowed to ripen indoors. A few guidelines to use in determining whether pears are ready to be picked include: healthy fruits begin to drop; there is a change in fruit color from

green to yellow; and the stem separates easily from the branch. To pick pears, grasp the fruit firmly and twist or roll it to make the stem separate from the tree. If pears are picked before they are fully ripe, they should be ripened at room temperature of 60° to 70° F. This will result in optimum quality and smoothness of flesh. If you want to keep pear for a longer period of time, store the freshly picked fruit in the refrigerator.

Plum – As plums approach maturity, there is a rapid increase in sugar content and the color changes markedly. With blue or purple varieties, the color changes from green to greenish-blue or reddish-purple, then to dark blue or purple. In other varieties, the color proceeds from a yellowish-green to a more definite yellow or straw yellow, and then to their characteristic yellow or red. As the color increases the flesh becomes slightly soft, especially at the tip end. Fruit that is going to be cooked or preserved can be picked when slightly under-ripe. Plums can be stored for two to four weeks at 30° to 32°F, but at 37° to 50°F they will not keep as long.

Raspberry – Fresh raspberries harvested at their peak of quality surpass by far those purchased at retail outlets. Ripe raspberries will separate easily from the plant. To ensure that none of the fruit gets too ripe, berries should be picked every two or three days. Because hot weather ripens raspberries very quickly, it is sometimes necessary to pick every day. To harvest, use the thumb, index, and middle fingers to pick the berries. They should be placed (not dropped) directly in a basket or other container. Harvested berries should be handled as little as possible and kept in the shade until they can be placed in cool storage. Under ideal conditions (31° to 32° F and 90 to 95 percent humidity) the fruit will keep for a day or two.

Strawberry – Strawberries that are picked when three-fourths red will develop full color and flavor in one to two days at 70° F. Berries that are only half-red will seldom have the flavor, texture, or size of berries that are more mature when picked. The best time to pick the fruit is early in the morning when the berries are still cool. The fruit should be picked with the stem attached. This is accomplished by grasping the stem between the thumb and forefinger and pinching it off. Pulling and snapping, but leaving the cap on is all right if the fruit is to be used immediately. It is best to process the berries soon after picking, because fruit that is stored for several days will lose some of its fresh, bright color. It will also shrivel and generally deteriorate in quality. For best storage, keep strawberries at a temperature below 40° F and at a relative humidity of 85 to 90 percent.