

## Harvest of Apples and Pears

Fruit trees are often looked upon as the most difficult edible plants to grow—maybe with the exception of the tomato, depending on the year. Once a suitable variety is selected and planted, there's pruning, thinning, a barrage of insects and diseases to combat and when all is said and done, harvest can pose additional difficulties. Apples and pears both display subtle clues to tell the anxious gardener when it's time to enjoy the literal fruits of your labor.

When looking at apple ripeness, variety is crucial. Some varieties were harvested in July while others won't be harvested until October. For a few varieties you can estimate apple ripeness from the time of the bloom. Jonathan should be harvested 135 days after bloom, Delicious; 145, Golden Delicious; 145, and Winesap; 155 days. Keep in mind that cooler weather will increase the number of days until your fruit is ripe.

The next indicator of ripeness is apple color. Although common sense would indicate that a red apple is ready to eat—that is not always the case. Apples often turn red before they are fully mature. To truly tell if the apple is ripe, check for a distinct yellow color at the top and bottom of the fruit. If the yellow is present the apple is close to, if not at maturity.

Taste is yet another, albeit more daring, way to test ripeness. Sampling an apple or two will tell you if they have the sweetness you're looking for or, if they have a starchy flavor, that they need more time. If some apples have already fallen and have this starchy taste, store them, as they may become sweeter. While you're tasting your apples, look at the color of the flesh. As the apple's starches change to sugars the flesh should change from light green to white. Holding it up to the light may make it easier to determine what color you are seeing.

Another color factor you can look for is the color of the seeds. They too, are light green at immaturity but turn brown when the fruit ripens. This is the least reliable of all the methods so it should be paired with another. In combination, these indicators can help you discern just when your apples are ready to eat!

Unlike apples, pears need to be harvested prior to ripening. If you allow your pears to ripen on the tree they will develop grit cells and the inner flesh will become brown and soft.

Commercial growers determine the best time to harvest pears by measuring the decrease in fruit firmness as the fruit matures. A Magness meter is used for testing and measures the pressure needed to push a 5/16-inch tip a specified distance into an individual fruit.

Home gardeners have a few less technical methods at their disposal. First, unlike apples, the skin color *can* be an indicator of ripeness. With pears you're looking at the fruit ground color, or the "background" color of the fruit. An unripe pear will have a dark green ground color while a ripe pear will be light green to yellowish green.

Another indication of ripeness is lifting up and gently twisting the pears while they're still attached to the tree. If they separate easily they are ready to be picked. If you've ever seen a pear you know they have pores all over the skin of the fruit. These are called lenticels and they will start out as a greenish white but turn brown with fruit maturity. When they are ready to eat these lenticels will look like freckles all over the fruit.

The most pleasant indicator as your pear ripens off the tree, is its development of the aroma of a pear. The final way to see if your pears are ripe is the same as with the apple; sample them! Pears ripen in one to three weeks after harvest if held at 60 to 65 degrees F. Storing at too high a temperature (75 degrees F and higher) will result in the fruit breaking down without ripening.

Seeds, skins, flesh and stems are all changing as the fruit matures. Paying close attention to your fruit and all the signals it's giving you will help you harvest at the perfect time and enjoy the peak flavor these fruits can offer. Enjoy your late summer harvest!