

Harvesting Summer Fruits

Grapes, peaches and a few kinds of melons are all harvested this time of year but can each be a challenge to harvest if you don't know what to look for. Learning these simple times can help you maximize your harvest and ensure you're eating the sweetest of what your plants have to offer!

Grapes

Grape ripeness cannot be based on color alone, often grapes are fully colored *before* they're fully ripe. Ripe grapes will have a whitish coating on the fruit and seeds that are brown rather than the unripe green seeds. Finally, taste the grapes. Ripe grapes should be sweet—not tart. Don't harvest grapes before they're ripe, they will not continue to ripen off the plant. Once harvested, grapes can be stored for up to eight weeks if kept at 32 degrees with 85 percent relative humidity. If you have an excessive grape harvest don't overlook making juice, jellies, jams and wine.

Peaches

Although best when allowed to ripen on the tree, often peaches are picked early to save the fruit from insect and animal damage. A nearly ripe peach will have a reddish coloration all over but a green tint near the stem of the fruit. Once that area turns yellow the peach may be harvestable. If it is still green, it definitely isn't ready. A ripe peach will be easily removed from the branch if you lightly lifted and twisted. As you check your peaches for ripeness, you'll notice that not all of the fruit on the tree will be ripe at once. Pick only what's ripe and check the remaining fruit every 2-3 days. It will take between 3-5 harvests to get all the fruit from a peach tree. If you pick your peaches early, allow them to ripen at room temperature. Once ripe, they can be refrigerated to preserve them a few days longer.

Melon

Muskmelons are the easiest crops to determine ripeness. When a muskmelon is ripe, the melon should easily detach from the vine. This is called "slipping" and as a result you'll see a dish shaped scar where the stem was attached to the fruit. In addition to helping you harvest, this trick is also handy at the grocery store. As you select a melon from the store, look for the dish-shaped scar. The melon should also have a musky aroma.

Watermelons are slightly more difficult to harvest. If the stem of the watermelon is brown where it attaches to the melon this is a good indication that it is ripe. Near the base of the fruit there should also be a slightly rough surface—sometimes called sugar bumps. Finally, ripe watermelons normally develop a yellow background color where the melon lays on the ground.

Honeydew melons are the most difficult to harvest. Unlike muskmelons these fruit do not "slip" from the vine when ripe. Instead, look for a soft spot on the flower end of the fruit, the end opposite the stem. Honeydews may also indicate their ripeness by changing to a lighter color or even a yellow color. Often this exact coloration is variety dependent.

Watering Fruit Plants

When temperatures exceed 90 degrees F, fruit plants quickly lose water. As plants strain to move water up from the roots to the foliage of the plants, fruit growth slows and sometimes stops completely. In some cases, fruit may even drop, reducing overall yields. If fruit crops are stressed during the time they normally develop next year's buds, the following year's crop may be affected.

With fruiting trees, vines, canes and other woody plants moisture should be checked at the soil level. Using a metal rod or wooden dowel (sturdy) push into the soil near the plants base. Moist and wet soils will be easily penetrated while dry soil will feel like a hard pan. Your rod should reach a depth of 8-12" easily. If you cannot reach this depth, the area should be irrigated. Sprinklers, soaker hoses, drip irrigation or even a slow trickle of a garden hose can all be used. If sprinklers are used, turn the pressure down low so the water is primarily hitting the soil, not the trunk or foliage of the plant.

How long you irrigate depends on the size of the plant and the volume of water being applied. Use your rod or dowel to periodically check the soil moisture. After a few times of using this method, you'll have a good idea of about how long your watering method takes to penetrate the soil to the appropriate depth.

In hot summer conditions, plants should be checked at least weekly. For shallow rooted plants, like strawberries, they should be checked closed to 2-3 times per week. Any newly planted trees or shrubs should be checked 2 times a week for the first 2-3 years in hot conditions.